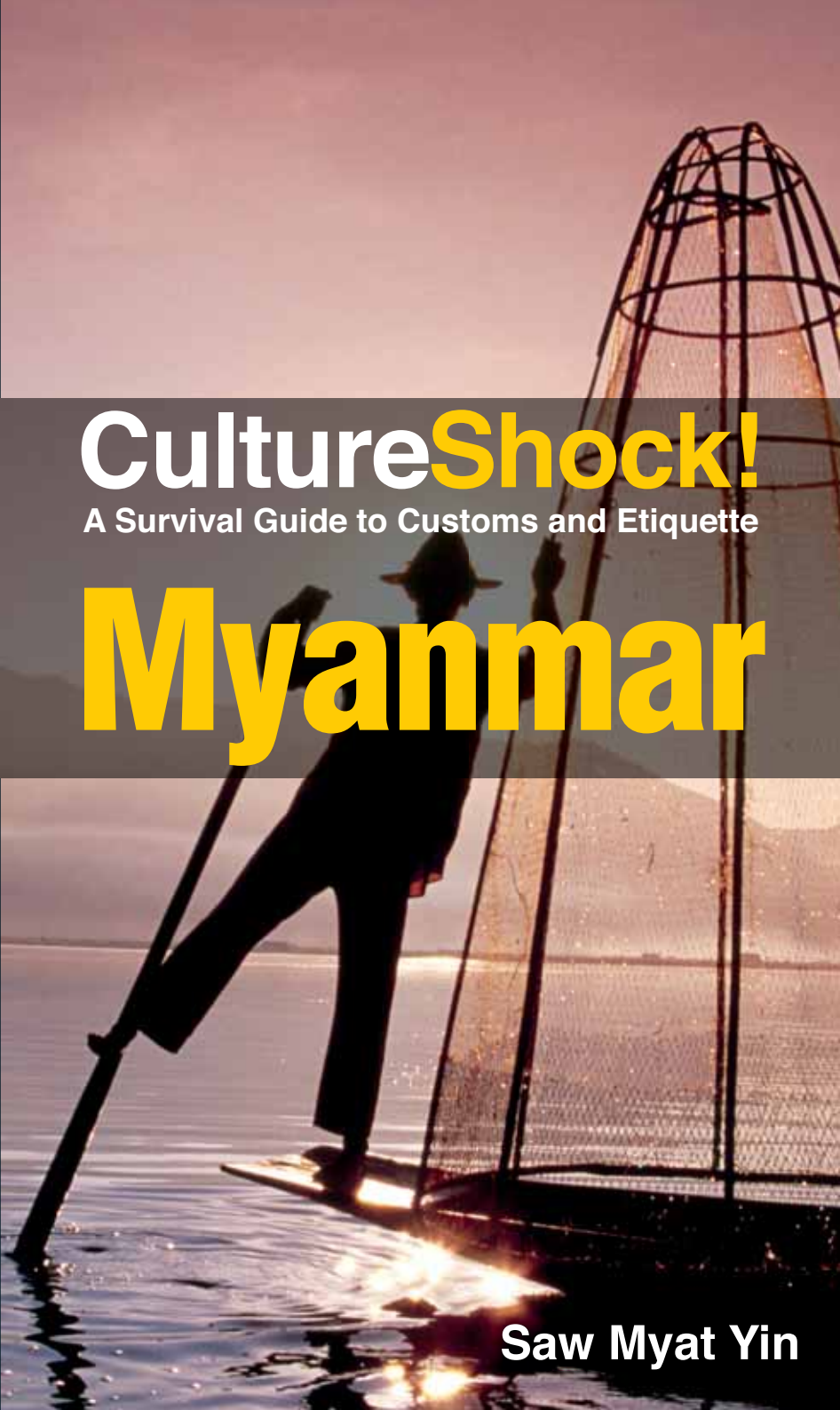
CultureShock!
A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette
Myanmar
Saw Myat Yin

VISIT…

CultureShock!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

Myanmar

Saw Myat Yin

Marshall Cavendish Editions

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and covers a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of basic information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette of the country. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

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INTRODUCTION

Unlike most of the other books in the *CultureShock!* series, *CultureShock! Myanmar* is not written by an expatriate who has lived in the country described but by a native of that place. What is presented is a description of certain points of sensitivity for the foreigner, but from an insider's perspective. Consequently, it was with some trepidation that I undertook the task of writing this book for fear of a native familiarity causing me to miss the wood for the trees (or vice versa).

To balance the description as far as possible, questionnaires were sent out to a sample of people who had lived in or, more commonly, had visited Myanmar. Foreigners who have lived in Myanmar for longer periods are mainly diplomatic corps personnel and United Nations staff, many of whom were not readily accessible. Anecdotal evidence is supplied where questionnaires could not be used. Such examples help to describe possible difficulties, situations and things to look out for.

There may be some reason to doubt the need for a book like this. Though Myanmar is no longer as closed as it once was, visitors to the country number fewer than those to neighbouring countries and remain restricted to visiting only certain areas. In 2004, a proposed road map towards democracy for the country, with more openness and transparency and for visitors, more freedom in travelling within Myanmar seemed to be in progress but has slowed down in being implemented.

CultureShock! Myanmar may be before its time but it is hoped that such a time will not be too far in the future as to make this book meaningless. If this book is also of use to those Myanmar people of a younger generation who have gone abroad for economic or other reasons, to help them explain Myanmar culture, attitudes and perceptions to their children and their new friends of different cultures, then this book would have achieved some part of its purpose.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Ms Shirley Hew and Ms Shova Loh for making this book possible through their friendship and large doses of encouragement. My thanks and appreciation to Ms Patricia Herbert for helping me with the questionnaires, and to all the respondents who shared their experiences and gave me much useful information, also to Mr John Okell for helpful suggestions which I have incorporated. Many thanks to the Britain Burma Society and Derek Brooke-Wavell, Honorary Secretary of the Society, and also to the following individual authors and next of kin for kind permission to use material from *Lines from a Shining Land*: Sir Nicholas Fenn, Dr Glyn Court, Stella McGregor (Pauline McGregor Currien) and Peter Smart (Mrs Joan Smart). To Joanne Riccioni, my editor, thank you for your great patience in working on the manuscript and putting it all together.

All errors and omissions in subject matter are my own. Any additional information or corrections are most welcome through the publishers.

Quotations have been used without changing the words Burma and Burmese to Myanmar as that was the way they were written.

It is common to see Myanmar women carrying their children while going about their daily work.

DEDICATION

To my parents and teachers
with gratitude,
and to my family
with love.

MAP OF MYANMAR

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

CHAPTER 1

'It is only with time, with the growth of sympathy, that the charm and beauty of the palace steal on one.'
—V.C. Scott O'Connor, *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma.*

MYANMAR'S CHARM

The quotation refers to Mandalay Palace but the same sentiment seems to apply to Myanmar itself. Many visitors have said that Myanmar's charm steals on one, though it may not be on the first visit. Visitors to Yangon (Rangoon) are mostly awestruck by the majestic sight of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda which can be seen from miles away if coming in by sea from the Bay of Bengal up the Yangon River. Novelist Somerset Maugham described it as "superb and glistening with its gold, like a sudden hope in the dark night of the soul".

Visiting the country for the first time or staying there for longer periods can present something of a shock. One Myanmar-watcher was said to have exclaimed, "Myanmar seems to have been set in aspic, it is so unchanging!" In other words, things were almost exactly the same as when he last saw the country more than 40 years ago. Others have described it as a journey back through a time tunnel or a time warp as time in Myanmar seems to have stopped somewhere in the early 1900s. Visitors from places like Singapore and Malaysia often see in present-day Myanmar the look and lifestyle their own countries had at the turn of the century. Things taken for granted in most countries like 24-hour electricity, gas and water supply and petrol stations along every mile of the road just aren't there. Some things that Myanmar people take for granted and don't worry

about can really shock visitors: one friend described the shock of having to take off her shoes and walk barefoot to climb up to the Shwe Dagon; another was so annoyed to find that there was no ice in her welcome drink nor was any to be found for the moment in the large hotel she had just arrived at.

First European Visitor

While Marco Polo, the famous Venetian merchant and traveller-explorer-adventurer, did record that a battle between Burmese people and the Mongols took place in 1287, it is uncertain whether he actually did set foot in the country, and the earliest European to record a visit to Burma seems to be Nicolo di Conti (also a merchant from Venice) who sailed along a large river on the coast of Arakan (Rakhine) and reached the city of Innwa (Ava). His records were written in Latin.

Another Italian merchant from Genoa reached the city of Bago (Pegu) around the end of the 15th century and recorded its splendour, the large number of elephants (more than 10,000) owned by the lord of the city and the precious gemstones to be found in Innwa, a 'distant 15 days' journey away'. Bago appears to have been much closer to the sea at that time than it is now. In later centuries, many Portuguese, Dutch, French and English merchants travelled to Burma in search of fortune. Burma finally fell to the British through the three successive Anglo-Burmese Wars largely because of its valuable resources.

Myanmar usually evokes 'golden memories' for those who lived there prior to the 1950s. This description may have literally been inspired by the golden-spired pagodas that dot the whole country, or by the fact that the Myanmar people refer to their country as Shway Pyi Daw (The Golden Land), 'golden' being an honorific for a beloved object. In reality, such golden memories refer to a time of comparative prosperity when money had value and many goods and services were available locally.

Lately, a number of books have referred to the country as 'The Forgotten Land', which Myanmar has indeed become

because of its isolation and closed nature. Many people (even Asians) have only a vague idea of where Myanmar is located, despite the fact that the country occupies a very large area of land between two of the world's most heavily populated countries—India and China.

Later visitors and those staying longer either love or hate life in Myanmar. The uncertain nature of basic amenities, such as regular supply of water and electricity; the lack of a wide variety of consumer goods found in more developed countries; and the relative absence of nightlife, even in Yangon, are cause enough for foreign residents to find living in Myanmar a great inconvenience.

Yet those who do love it will praise the fresh air, the fresh vegetables and fruits and the green trees, although it is true that the latter are rapidly diminishing in number. An agreeable climate, relatively inexpensive food, custom tailoring that does not cost the earth and friendly domestics are some of the reasons that foreigners have liked to live in Myanmar, especially Yangon. The secret is that these residents have learnt to get the best of both worlds by enjoying the advantages of underdevelopment, while taking frequent shopping trips to cities in the more developed neighbouring countries to get what they need in terms of consumer goods.

Regret

The morning came at last for us to leave. Friends came to wave us goodbye and one of the sights I shall long remember was our chauffeur lying, crying on the wharf.... So much for the native population wanting the British to leave!!

There is a legend that if one looks back at the Pagoda when leaving and sailing down the river, one will return. At that time I was glad to leave and would not look back. I wish now I had!

—Stella McGregor, *Lines from a Shining Land*

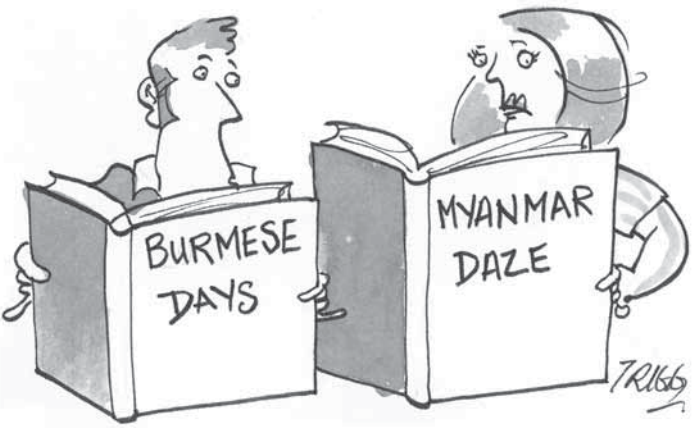
There is no doubt that some Myanmar are also able to enjoy a lifestyle that would be the envy of people in developed countries. When earnings can be obtained in foreign exchange, many Myanmar are able to buy consumer goods on the black market, hire servants and own several

cars and large houses with gardens. Of course, such people form a minority and most people struggle to maintain a normal existence amid economic instability.

Because Myanmar is a little-known country, we shall start off with a brief survey, touching on its geography, history and economy.

GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND POLITICS

CHAPTER 2



'Burma. It is beautiful and it is sad.
Much of its sadness lies in its beauty.'
—Timothy Syrota, *Welcome to Burma and Enjoy the Totalitarian Experience*

GEOGRAPHY

Many people do not know where Myanmar is located although Myanmar occupies a large land area of over 677,000 sq km (261,391 sq miles), between two very large countries (in terms of area and population-wise), India on its west and China to the east. When it was known as Burma (up to 1989), it was often confused with Bermuda, an island in the Atlantic Ocean. Now that it is known as Myanmar the situation has not improved as the country has become more and more isolated of late.

Myanmar lies between latitude 10 and 28 degrees north, and longitude 92 and 101 degrees east. Borders are shared with Bangladesh and India in the northwest, China in the northeast, and Laos and Thailand in the southeast. Towards the south and southwest are the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

Myanmar can be divided into distinct zones, namely the northern mountain ranges, the Shan plateau in the east, the central Dry Zone, the river valleys, the Ayeyarwady (or Irrawaddy) delta and the long Taninthayi (Tenasserim) strip in the south.

The western and northern mountain ranges are very high and form the outer spurs of the Himalayas. There is snow in the most remote parts, though most Myanmar have never been to these areas. However, visitors (mainly trekkers from the mountaineering associations) say that the firs and the rhododendrons in bloom are a particularly beautiful sight.

The Shan plateau in the east rises about 1,000 m (3,280 ft) above sea level. The Thanlwin (or Salween) river, which has its source in Tibet, flows down the plateau through very narrow and unnavigable gorges. The Ayeyarwady, however, is navigable, and it is the longest river in the country, beginning in the Himalayas and flowing for more than 2,000 km (1,242 miles). As well as being a major means of transport, the Ayeyarwady's annual flooding during the rainy season makes its rich banks and delta area the most fertile in Myanmar for paddy farming.

The river valley effectively divides Myanmar into two areas, the east and west. The eastern area is more densely populated and is connected to Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon) and other major towns by road and railway networks. In contrast, the western areas have to be reached by riverboat or by bridges—the most famous, and at one time the only bridge, is the Innwa (Ava) Bridge (also known as the Sagaing Bridge) near Mandalay. Many new bridges have been built in the late 1990s with Chinese aid, for example at Myitkyina and Pyay (Prome).

The Dry Zone is a semi-desert area, roughly in the centre of the country, where thorny trees, shrubs and cacti are the main vegetation. It is in this area that Mandalay and Bagan (Pagan) are located.

The Ayeyarwady delta is made up of many creeks and streams with banks of alluvial soils suitable for growing rice, the staple of the local diet. Many fish and shrimps are also available in this area and the delta is famous for various types of dried fish, shrimp and fish sauces and pastes. Here, a typical meal is one of rice, fish paste dip and fresh vegetables (boiled or raw) from the farmer's vegetable patch. Similarly, in the areas where cooking oil is produced, a simple meal would consist of rice mixed with oil and lightly salted.

The Taninthayi strip that lies towards the south is largely cut off from other parts of the country. In this region, there is a long mountain range stretching north to south and a narrow coastal strip. While the land offers tin mines and quarries, the chief economic activity here in recent years has been trade with Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. However, to reach the most southerly parts, transport has to be by sea or air.

Towns and Cities

There are few large towns in Myanmar (estimated population 68 million, 2009) except for Yangon which has been the capital since colonial times until the end of 2005 (when the government moved the capital to a newly built city named Nay Pyi Daw, meaning "royal city", near Pyinmana about 322 kilometres (200miles) north of Yangon) and the main port. Yangon is a quiet and green city with two large lakes and a population of about 5 million. The other two main cities are Mandalay (population 1,208,099) and Mawlamyine (Moulmein) which has a population of 300,000. Other towns are relatively small.

Mandalay, the country's main cultural centre, has grown in spite of several fires that razed large parts of the city to the ground. New and finer buildings are currently being built and the talk is that the financial backing behind these ventures comes from a growing class of nouveau riche who may possibly be drug-related traders. How true such rumours are is anybody's guess.

Myanmar was next in line to take over the rotating chairmanship of ASEAN and host the 12th Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit meeting in 2006 and many new high-rises were built to transform the capital into a modern Asian city. However, due to much pressure, especially from the Western countries, over alleged human rights abuses and the continued house arrest of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi among other issues, Myanmar gave up its turn to the Philippines.

Yangon has also made efforts to spruce up appearances of late. This has included compulsory repainting, walling, fencing and road repairs. Again, many of the community's wealthier members appear to have contributed financially to these projects, which have also included the construction of parks, fountains and small-scale amusement centres.

One should also note that street names in Yangon are now Myanmar names rather than English. For example, Windermere Road, a long and winding road named after the English river, is now Thanlwin Road, after the Myanmar river. Roads that were spelt according to British phonetics are now spelt the way they would be pronounced in Myanmar. For example, Prome Road, one of the longest roads in the city (it really does lead to the town after which it is named if you follow it), is now called Pyi (also Pyay) Road. After independence, many roads were renamed entirely, so Dalhousie, Fraser and Montgomery Streets became Maha Bandoola, Anawrahta and Bogyoke Aung San Street respectively, after Myanmar's famous generals. Indeed, you'll probably find an Aung San Street in every Myanmar town.

Sadly, many small Myanmar towns which were previously quite prosperous by virtue of being located along the railway route, have now sunk into poverty because of the greater use of roads. This has been brought about by the import of large numbers of pick-up trucks that are used for carrying goods and people from one town to another.

Climate

Myanmar has three seasons: the dry season from March to June; the wet season or monsoon from July to October; and the cool season from November to February.

Climate, of course, varies from region to region due to the country's diverse geography. In the river valleys and

delta, including Yangon, the rainfall is about 254 cm (100 inches) per annum and the average temperature is about 32°C (90°F). The hottest period is in April and May when temperatures can reach about 40°C (104°F), while it is coldest in January when temperatures often fall to 16°C (60°F). In the very high mountains, in the northernmost part of the country, there is snowfall in the cold season and temperatures can drop to freezing point in the other mountainous regions in the ethnic states.

The coastal areas in the west and south have very high rainfall, about 508 cm (200 inches) per annum. In the rainy season, this means days and days of continuous rain, unlike Yangon and the towns south of the Dry Zone where rain usually alternates with sunny periods. Take note that this continuous rain and the excessive humidity which results tend to cause mildew and fungus on clothes, books and even furniture.

In the Dry Zone, temperatures can reach an incredible 46°C (114°F). To cope with such unbearable heat the people have a number of customs and habits. Many will move beds and mattresses outdoors onto pavements at night, returning to the house in the cool of the early hours; others sleep on mats sprayed with water; while some will bathe in a barrel at regular intervals, or even stay there!

On a visit to Nyaung-oo near Bagan, the author was forced by the stifling heat to join the rest of the town trying to sleep outdoors. Unfortunately, I ended up being awake for most of the night, listening to the conversations of neighbours who had given up on sleep and were spending the night catching up on gossip. This gossip also included reference to a wake which was being held around the corner, said to be a death caused by bathing at the wrong hour. Because of the high temperatures, the locals believe that sickness and even death can be caused by taking baths in the afternoons or after being exposed to the sun for a long period.

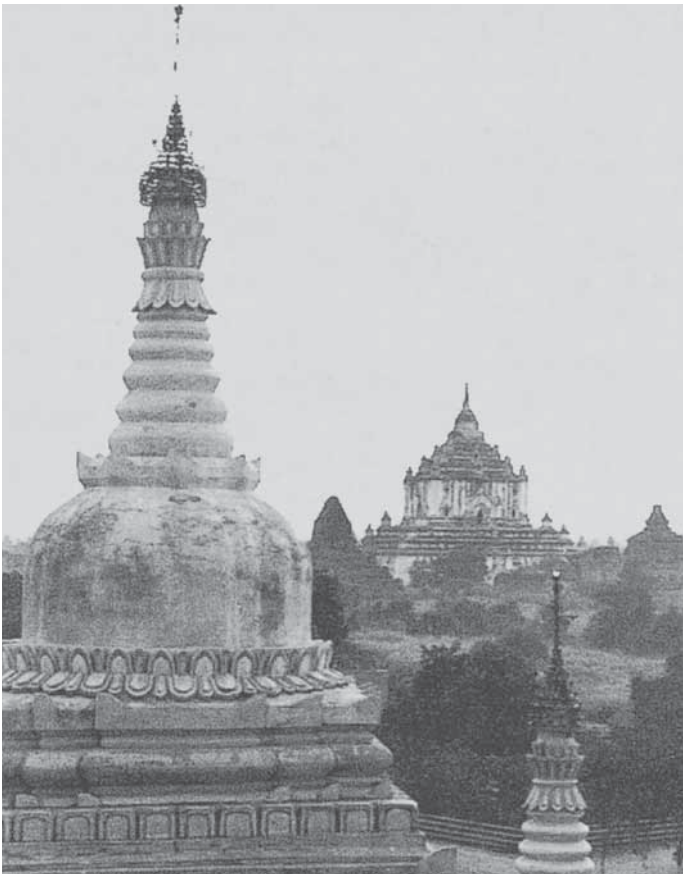
In the Dry Zone, during the cool season, it is dusty, dry and quite cold at night. Temperatures can drop to about 15°C (59°F) or less in Mandalay or Mon-ywa, for example.

HISTORICAL MILESTONES

The Myanmar people are very proud of their history, which dates back to the founding of Bagan (Pagan) in the 9th century AD The Myanmar Empire was once quite substantial, spreading as far as Assam and Manipur to the west and as far as Cambodia in the east. The Myanmar kings traditionally conceived of themselves and their empire as the centre of the universe and they ruled with absolute power. Later, however, in their dealings with the advancing British, this was to eventually prove their downfall as they did not have enough knowledge or experience of the outside world.

Early History

Myanmar's early history is shrouded in myth and legend. However, experts believe that the Ayeyarwady valley was inhabited 5,000 years ago by the Mon who entered from the region now known as Thailand and Cambodia and began to cultivate the land. At roughly the same time, a loosely knit group of tribes known as the Pyu migrated from their Tibetan home and settled in the upper Ayeyarwady valley. Excavations show that a great civilisation centred around the city of Pyi, also spelled as Pyay (Prome). However, the Pyu were defeated by the Mon in the 8th century and the



The pagodas at Bagan are some of the most beautiful sights in Myanmar.

Bamar (Burmans), who had previously been subject to them, came into prominence.

The First Myanmar Empire

The Bamar established their kingdom at Bagan but it was two centuries later, under the rule of King Anawrahta in the 11th century, that the first Myanmar Empire was founded. During his reign, the Mon people in the south were conquered and most of the country was united, except for the Shan hills and parts of Rakhine and Taninthayi. He also brought the Tripitaka to Bagan, thus introducing Buddhism to the people, who were previously animists.

However, when the kingdom fell to the Mongols in 1287, it disintegrated into small states with the Mon building a new state in Bago (Pegu), the Shan at Innwa (Ava) and the Bamar at Toungoo.

The Second Myanmar Empire

The second Myanmar Empire was founded by King Bayinnaung between 1551 and 1581. He regained territories lost by his predecessors and added to them Chiang Mai, Ayutthaya (both now part of Thailand) and Taninthayi. The capital was moved to Bago, which became an important port for trade with neighbouring countries. Later, in the 17th century, the capital was moved to Innwa when the British, Dutch and French trading companies were established in Myanmar. However, with help from the French, the Mon captured Innwa in 1752 and from there tried to control all of the country.

The Third Myanmar Empire

It was only after eight years of warfare that the Mon were finally defeated by King Alaungpaya who united the country and formed the third Myanmar Empire. His son and successor, Hsinbyushin, successfully invaded neighbouring Siam and destroyed Ayutthaya in 1767. It was this conquest which brought the Siamese influence to Myanmar arts, dance and music. Hsinbyushin's brother, Bodawpaya, later won Rakhine and did much to improve communications, education and the legal system in Myanmar. The Konbaung Dynasty which this family founded was the last dynasty to rule Myanmar before the British took it over as a colony.

British Rule

The British annexed Burma, as it was known then, in three stages, during the three Anglo-Burmese Wars of 1824, 1852 and 1886. In the first, they gained the Rakhine and Taninthayi territories; in the second, lower Burma was conquered; while the third resulted in the control of Mandalay and upper Burma. The royal family members and their retinue were exiled to India.

It was only in the first part of the 20th century that nationalist leaders came into prominence.

National Hero

The most famous nationalist leader was Myanmar's national hero, Aung San. Starting his political career as a young student at Rangoon University, he developed and led the Thakin Movement, *thakin* (meaning "master") being a term the Myanmar had to use when addressing the British. Members of the movement deliberately wore traditional dress, especially jackets made of rough reddish brown cotton called *pin ni*.

World War II and Independence

During World War II, Aung San formed the Thirty Comrades, a group which resisted British rule and looked to the Japanese for help in training forces to fight them. When the Japanese Occupation proved to be cruel and ruthless, the nationalists were forced to seek the help of the British to drive the Japanese out. The Burma Independence Army (BIA) finally liberated the country from the Japanese on 27 March 1945, a date now known as Armed Forces Day (previously Resistance Day).

After the war, independence from the British was negotiated by the nationalists. However, General Aung San and other cabinet ministers were assassinated on 19 July 1947, now commemorated as Martyrs' Day. Independence was eventually won on 4 January 1948.

Protest and Insurrection

The insurrections and protests which broke out in Myanmar shortly after independence have in fact continued to the present day.

Up to the late 1950s, the political and economic situation was unstable and in 1958, the armed forces formed a caretaker government. Elections were held in 1960 to return power to civil rule. However, the insurrection became more severe with the Shan still claiming the right to secession which had been promised them in the Panglong Agreement of 1947.

A coup d'etat in March 1962 brought the Revolutionary Council to power and, soon after, the government declared its socialist aims under policies known as The Burmese Way to Socialism. The Burma Socialist Programme Party was also officially formed, but the government's extreme isolationism and attempts to be self-sufficient caused severe economic repercussions. Protest manifested itself in terms of frequent student demonstrations and workers' strikes.

In 1988, these protests reached a head when a students' brawl in a tea shop sparked nationwide demonstrations. The protestors were brutally suppressed by a military coup and the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) formed a government. The country's name was changed from the Socialist Republic of Burma to the Union of Myanmar and the names of towns and roads were all changed to Myanmar equivalents. Rangoon became Yangon, its name in Myanmar language, meaning 'end of strife'.

By the time elections were held in May 1990, more than 200 political parties had been formed under proposals for a multiparty form of government. The largest of these, the National League for Democracy (NLD), was headed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of General Aung San. Her party won the elections by a landslide, despite the fact that she herself was placed under house arrest in July 1989, after continuous harassment during her travels throughout the country giving talks and meeting people. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 but, along with many of her supporters, remained under arrest, refusing to accept exile. She was released in July 1995.

Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest again in late 2000 and was released unconditionally only 19 months later. However in end-May 2003, confrontations between NLD and government supporters while on an up-country trip to visit NLD offices saw her taken into 'protective custody'.

Myanmar's human rights record remains poor in international terms even though future economic aid and foreign investments appear to hinge on this issue. The country became a member of ASEAN in 1997.

In November 2005, the country's capital was moved to a new location in Pyinmana about 322 km (200 miles) north of Yangon to the astonishment of the international community. The city's offices and other buildings had been secretly under construction since about 2004. Most of the government officials have also had to move, causing more hardship for them, as they already have to suffer lower incomes than the private sector. (Salaries and wages were increased by five to ten times in 2005-2006 but this has only made the inflation worse.)

KEY DATES

849 Founding of Bagan.

1044 Anawrahta becomes King of Bagan and forms the first Myanmar Empire. Buddhism is brought to Myanmar.

1287 Kublai Khan and his Mongol army destroy Bagan. Myanmar disintegrates into small states for the next three centuries.

1551 Bayinnaung reconquers former territories and founds the second Myanmar Empire. After his death in 1581, the country slowly falls apart.

1755 Alaungpaya of Shwebo reunites the country and forms the third Myanmar Empire.

1824 The first Anglo-Burmese War breaks out and Arakan (now Rakhine) and Tenasserim (now Taninthayi) are ceded to the British.

1852 The second Anglo-Burmese War results in the loss of the southern half of Myanmar to the British.

1886 The third Anglo-Burmese War makes Myanmar a province of British India and the royal family is exiled to India.

1906 The Young Men's Buddhist Association is formed. It became an important nationalist organisation.

1937 Burma, as Myanmar was known then, separates from India with a new constitution and legislative council.

1943 Burma falls under Japanese occupation.

1945 27 March, General Aung San leads open resistance against the Japanese.
5 May, the British reoccupy Yangon.

1947 1 January, Aung San leads a delegation to London to negotiate independence.
12 February, the Panglong Agreement is signed by representatives of Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Shan and other ethnic groups.
19 July, Aung San and his cabinet are assassinated. Prime Minister U Nu forms a new cabinet.

1948 4 January, Myanmar gains independence and becomes the Union of Burma. Insurgencies break out soon after.

1949 The Kayin army reaches the outskirts of Yangon but the government regains control.

1951 Elections are held. The economy declines, suffering from the fall in the world price of rice.

1958 A caretaker government steps in as the main political party splits into two factions.

1960 Elections are held but the insurrection becomes more severe as the Shan claim secession.

1962 The Revolutionary Council takes over after a coup d'etat.

1964 Nationalisation of private trading firms, banks, industries, schools and hospitals is carried out, along with demonetisation.

1974 A new constitution is adopted and Myanmar follows the Burmese Way to Socialism, a policy of self-reliance, isolation and strict neutrality.

1985 Demonetisation of K 100 and K 500 notes with limited compensation after one year.

1987 Demonetisation of K 25, K 35 and K 75 notes without any compensation.

1988 18 September, student-led demonstrations sparked by demonetisation lead to a military coup. The SLORC forms local governing bodies at all levels of administration.

1989 The country becomes the Union of Myanmar.

1990 In May, elections are held. The NLD, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, wins by a landslide.

1993 The National Convention for drawing up the nation's new constitution convenes.

1995 Aung San Suu Kyi is released from house arrest. The NLD boycotts the National Convention.

1996 Aung San Suu Kyi announces that the NLD will draw up its own draft constitution. Universities close after student demonstrations.

SLORC signs ceasefire agreement with drug lord Khun Sa and his army, and refuses to extradite him to the United States.

1997 US President Clinton imposes a ban on all new US investment in Myanmar. Canada does the same.

SLORC changes its name to State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Myanmar joins ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations).

1998 Aung San Suu Kyi is prevented from travelling outside Yangon.

2000 Myanmar comes under increasing fire for human rights abuses from international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Aung San Suu Kyi and party are prevented from travelling to Mandalay. She is placed under house arrest for the second time.

2002 Ne Win's son-in-law and three grandsons are accused of conspiring to overthrow the junta and arrested. They are later sentenced. Their whereabouts and fate remains unknown.

6 May, Aung San Suu Kyi is released unconditionally.

5 December, Ne Win dies.

2003 Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD members are attacked by pro-government mobs. She is placed again under house arrest 'for her own security'.

2004 The junta proposes a seven-point road map to democracy.

The junta unsuccessfully attempts to negotiate a ceasefire agreement with the Karen, one of the last groups of insurgents remaining.

The National Convention reconvenes for its work in drafting the new Constitution.

Late 2004, the Military Intelligence department is dismantled.

2005 On 6 November, the country's capital is moved to Nay Pyi Daw, meaning 'royal city', near Pyinmana.

2006 Late 2006, the Myanmar issue is to be put up to the UN Security Council for debate. The UN General Assembly Committee passes a resolution criticising the country's worsening human rights record. Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest despite repeated pleas for her release by many international figures including Nobel laureates Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former Czech president Vaclav Havel and a number of UN Special Envoys.

2007 Widespread demonstrations by monks and people over fuel prices in August and September; monks and lay demonstrators are arrested. The demonstration was named the Saffron Revolution by the media in reference to the saffron coloured robes of the monks.

2008 Cyclone Nargis hits Yangon and Ayeyarwady Delta in May with 138,000 deaths and damages estimated at US $10 billion, the worst disaster in history. Many cyclone-ravaged villages and towns still remain in a state of disrepair in 2010.

2009 Aung San Suu Kyi receives extended house arrest sentence of 18 months due to harbouring John Yettaw, an American, who swam across the Inya Lake and entered her home, staying there for two days.

2010 Elections are expected in 2010 but the government has not announced a date as at May 2010. Many parties have been formed but the NLD decides not to participate and the party is dissolved according to the election regulations.

ECONOMY

The economy remains largely agricultural, despite efforts to build a strong manufacturing sector. Manufacturing is still very outdated and industries are mainly state-owned. The lack of new technology, shortage of spare parts and scarcity of raw materials are the result of the lack of foreign exchange, which is in turn caused by low exports. An economic vicious circle is clearly in operation in Myanmar.

However, Myanmar's natural resources have always been described as abundant. The country possesses forests of teak, hardwoods and bamboo; precious gems such as rubies, sapphires and jade; mineral resources of silver, lead, tungsten and marble; and natural gas and oil. Apart from the British-owned Burmah Oil Company's development in the Yenangyaung area during colonial times, gas and oil resources (particularly offshore) remain largely untapped. Miles of beautiful and unpolluted beaches are also largely undeveloped due to a lack of security and capital.

Consequently, Myanmar remains an agricultural country with 40 per cent of its economy based on farming. The major industrial crops are rice, beans and pulses, cotton, tobacco, jute, sugar cane, rubber and coconut. Fish and shrimp are also abundant in Myanmar's waters and poachers frequently enter from neighbouring countries to fish.

As far as export revenues are concerned, gas exports are the highest share of about 35 per cent in 2004-2005, and teak and hardwood exports have long overtaken rice exports in Myanmar's traditional rice economy in recent years. Beans and pulses are also a major export, as are minerals and precious gems. Since the normalisation of border trade, revenues which had formerly been lost to the black market have been regained somewhat.

Despite opening up the economy in the 1990s, the role of the private sector still appears ambiguous. Government control has by no means been relinquished and the state sector, with its large unprofitable industries, still needs to be tackled. Much needed foreign investment came into the country in the 1990s, but alleged human rights abuses have brought on sanctions from the United States and the European Union (EU) and investments are being withdrawn. Chinese aid has been the most relied on.

Because of the many controls over the private sector during the socialist period there has been a huge black market for many consumer goods smuggled from neighbouring countries and this market continues to flourish and is estimated to be as high as 30 per cent of total foreign trade (also see Chapter Nine).

Money

The monetary unit in Myanmar is the kyat (pronounced "chat" and abbreviated as K). It is made up of 100 pyas. Kyat comes in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 50, 100, 200, 500 and 1,000.

Useful Scrap Metal

Coins are seldom seen as inflation is so high that they are no longer effective. In fact, it is rumoured that coins are melted down so that the metal may be used.

Demonetisation, whereby legal tender is declared unusable, has been carried out no less than three times in the past 45 years in Myanmar. Those with any savings found that they were worthless overnight and they were rarely given compensation. The political and economic reason behind this demonetisation was to hit at black market traders who held large amounts of currency outside the banking system. In the process, however, it also hit everyday people, especially the working class and retired.

The confidence in the national currency remains low today. People still do not wish to use the banks and either hold currency at home or buy US dollars (it is illegal to hold dollars but people do it anyway), gold, jewellery and real estate to diversify their savings. Where money is concerned, the man on the street is now reluctant to place all his eggs in one basket. A run on local commercial banks and finance companies in 2003 only made the people more wary of trusting the local commercial institutions.

Previously, all foreign visitors to Myanmar had to exchange US$ 300 into Foreign Exchange Certificates but this is no longer required. Tourists may apply for visas on arrival and must have at least US$ 300 with them.

Effects on Everyday Life

The effect of economic instability on everyday life has been hard on the Myanmar people. The older generation in particular has lived through times of relative prosperity and economic growth, only to experience the very real

financial loss through overnight demonetisation and a scarcity of basic foods and services which were once readily available.

The distribution of income is very uneven, although, to help overcome hardship, a secondary distribution often goes on. This can often take the form of charitable feasts and donations. For example, if a villager wins a lottery prize or increases his income from a good harvest, he may hold a *shinbyu* ceremony during which he will give a feast for fellow villagers if he can afford it (Refer to 'A Lifetime of Ceremony' on page 80). Wealthier members of the community will be sure to invite the whole village and in this way, many mouths are fed. Those in the civil service receive subsidies from the government in the form of rice and other essentials, as well as in cash.

In addition, the difficulty of obtaining basic goods and services has forced the people to develop their own brand of 'recycling'. The objective behind this is hardly ecological; it is actually scarcity that forces people to make use of literally everything and does not allow them the luxury of throwing anything away. Such items as empty bottles, chocolate boxes, old shoes and clothes, mattresses and pillows, bedsheets, books and newspapers are hoarded for some future use. For instance, old tyres may be made into slippers, or newspapers and old office stationery can be sold to make paper bags and wrapping paper.

This practice may also be due to the fact that plastic has not yet to become the ubiquitous article that it is elsewhere in the world. Leaves are still used to wrap many articles of food and, in place of string; various types of fibre or twine are used. These biodegradable articles can help to keep the environment clean but there is no strong sense of cleanliness among the people, who tend to drop litter everywhere. The use of leaves and vines is sure to deplete supplies and, as with many natural resources in Myanmar, there is no systematic replenishing and cultivation, just a continuous harvesting.

Because of the need to use utensils and other objects over and over, rather than just throwing them away when

they become damaged or broken, in Myanmar one can still find stalls or small booths for repair of umbrellas, shoes, watches, glasses and electrical appliances along some streets in Yangon and other cities. A friend living abroad once asked me to repair an expensive Japanese folding umbrella with one spoke broken—after repair she was able to use it for many more years.

Repairmen

For repairing of aluminum pots and pans, the repairmen go around the city streets and suburbs as do the knife sharpeners/honers with their circular whetstone or a grinding stone which can be turned with a handle as the knives and scissors are sharpened. Each type of repairman has his own signature call which your local domestic staff will be able to recognise.

MYANMAR

CHAPTER 3

'The Burmese are probably the
most engaging race in the East.'
—Sir James George Scott

PEOPLE

Myanmar has been described as an anthropologist's dream by some writers as it possesses such a great diversity of ethnic groups with distinct dress, customs and traditions. According to the 1983 Census (figures which have remained relatively unchanged), the distribution of these groups was as follows:

Bamar (Burman)	69%
Shan	8.5%
Karen	6.2%
Arakanese	4.5%
Other indigenous races	6.5%
Mixed Myanmar and foreign races	1.3%
Chinese	0.7%
Indians and Pakistanis	1.4%
Foreigners	1.9%

While the largest groups of Bamar live mainly in the river valleys and plains, many of the smaller ethnic minorities live in the mountains and hills, seldom venturing into the urban areas because of the poor communications infrastructure. In fact, many highland people have never visited the lowlands and vice versa.

Consequently, products and materials from one region do not reach other parts of the country, so they are little-known and not part of the normal consumption patterns there. This lack of communication serves to enhance the diversity of lifestyles, customs and habits among the people of Myanmar. For instance grapefruit juice, which is made in Kachin state and is available in Yangon, might not be consumed in the far south of Myanmar as it cannot be transported that far. To take advantage of the greatest variety of consumer goods, those who can go to Yangon will do so periodically for a shopping spree.

Proper Address

When Burma changed its name to Myanmar, the international media used the term Myanmese and Myanmarese as substitutes for the word 'Burmese' referring to the people of Myanmar. However these terms are not as preferred as the term 'Myanmar' which is used for the people and language as well the country.

Ethnic Groups

The people who settled in what is now known as Myanmar came in three waves of migration. The first migration brought the Mon and the Khmer, the second group were Tibeto-Burmans and the third consisted of the Tai-Chinese people who settled in the area in the 13th and 14th centuries.

The ethnic Bamar (Burman) who form the majority of the population are the descendants of the Burmans, Mon and the Tai-Chinese. They are predominantly Buddhist. However, the great diversity of ethnic peoples who make up the rest of the population may be divided into seven main groups. These are the Kachin, Kayin (or Karen), Kayah (or Red Karen, also known as Karenni), Shan (or Tai), Chin, Mon and Rakhine (or Arakanese). There are many more sub-groups within these main groups. Generally, the first five races are distinct in dress, traditions and culture, while the last two are more or less homogeneous in appearance and dress with the Bamar, but have their own languages. Most of the ethnic races live in the areas which have the same name,

often the mountains and hilly regions near the borders of the country, i.e., the Kachin live in Kachin State, the Kayin in Kayin state and so on.

The Mon and the Rakhine are closely related to the Bamar, being tall and dark in appearance, practising Buddhism and living mainly as farmers. On the other hand, the Kayin, who form two main groups called the Sgaw and Pwo Kayin, are often Christian and tend to have a fairer colouring and stockier build. The Shan are related to the people of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. They are usually tall and fair. Mainly farmers, they live in the river valleys and lowland pockets of the Shan plateau.

The Chin people live in the Chin states and are dark in complexion, while the Kachin live in the Kachin state in the northernmost part of Myanmar and tend to have a fair colouring but broad features. What links these groups is that both still practise animism, although some have been converted to Christianity by missionaries who came to their areas. These two tribes are also famed for their fierce fighting spirit.

As well as these ethnic races, you may also come across many Sino-Myanmar or Indo-Myanmar people, the result of intermarriage between the Myanmar and the large numbers of migrants from neighbouring India and China.

While I have outlined some of the more common characteristics and features of the main ethnic minorities in Myanmar, one should be wary of jumping to conclusions based on these. There are many other smaller ethnic groups, many of which have their own distinctive features, customs and dress. Some of these smaller ethnic races are the Palaung, Padaung, Lisu, Wa, Danu, Lahu, Lashi and Yaw.

The most famous of these is perhaps the Padaung who live in the Kayah state. People of this community form only a tiny proportion of the population, but they have become well-known because of tourism posters that show their women wearing heavy brass neck rings, perhaps fuelling the misconception that the practice is common among all Myanmar women.

For Protection's Sake

This tribal custom of wearing neck rings is said to be a deliberate deformation of the Padaung women so that they will not be taken by other tribes. Actually, the rings push the collarbone and shoulders down thus making the neck seem long. It is said that the rings cannot be removed as the neck becomes weakened and cannot support the head without a neckbrace, and there is danger of suffocation if the rings were to be taken off.

Ethnic War

Sadly, ethnic wars among the people of Myanmar have gone on from the time that independence was gained and there are no signs of the bitterness diminishing. Initially, these wars were instigated by the breaching of the Panglong Agreement of 1947, which stated that the main ethnic groups had a right to secede if they wished to after independence was gained. Now, over 60 years later, some ethnic races continue to fight over their right to autonomy, but also add discrimination, economic underdevelopment and uneven revenue distribution to their list of grievances. Large numbers of losses on all sides seem to have had little effect as a deterrent and over the years Myanmar has suffered from all the destruction and instability that warfare brings.

Peace would have brought much greater prosperity to the people much sooner but goals have been focused on political union rather than on economic development. Nevertheless, ceasefire agreements in the 1990s between the government and the Kachin, Wa, Shan, Pao and Mon have opened up many areas, which, judging from newspaper reports, may be developed for tourism in the future. Such economic development might be a greater incentive for peace.

In 2004, attempts to negotiate a ceasefire agreement with the Kayin resistance, the last groups still fighting the government, fell through. Fierce fighting and destruction of many villages have caused large numbers of Kayin and Kayinni to flee to neighbouring Thailand where they have to live in refugee camps or as illegal migrants.

LITERACY

The Myanmar are highly literate. The official literacy rate was an estimated 84 per cent of the population in 2002 and, in fact, Myanmar won a UNESCO award for its effective literacy campaign in the early 1970s. However, because the government wanted the country to receive Least Developed Status in the mid-1980s in order to get relief for its national debt, the 'effective' literacy rate was quoted as being much lower.

The population is largely literate because of the traditional system of monastic learning where boys and girls go to the local monastery to be taught the three R's. In return they sweep the compound, fetch water and do other errands and duties for the monks. Due to the education system breaking down in the past decades (because of the very low national budget allocations), the wealthier monasteries are again the place where parents may send their children, especially sons, for a basic education, especially in the rural areas.

Modern schooling in Myanmar usually consists of two years of pre-school, four years of primary school and four years of middle school. High school is two years and most university courses are four. Children begin school at about four or five but many only continue to the fourth grade or standard (aged around ten). This is particularly so in rural areas where parents need their children to help with farming activities and usually feel that primary education is quite adequate.

University education has seen a good deal of reorganisation in recent years, breaking up the larger and older institutions into smaller organisations and the universities moved to places quite far outside the capital and other cities so as to avoid a concentration of students in large campuses. The main intention was to split the student population into smaller groups to deter unrest and protest.

Those who can, try to make it to university as degrees are prestigious and coveted awards. In fact, in Myanmar, the more letters one has after one's name the better. This seems to apply whatever the qualification, a common suffix being E.T.E.C., meaning Electrical Training Evening Classes!

The quality of university education has fallen greatly not just because of the low government investment but also because of the reorganisations as lecturers and students alike encounter much hardship in commuting long distances to the new campuses, not to mention the lack of proper facilities. Thus, many young people end up taking correspondence courses for higher education while those who can afford it continue their education in tertiary institutions in Singapore and Bangkok or further afield depending on their resources, relatives and contacts.

MYANMAR PERCEPTIONS

It has frequently been said that being a Myanmar is synonymous with being a Buddhist. This may seem a simplistic definition, but it is true that the great majority of Myanmar is Buddhist and that they tend to think of their identity in terms of religion first. (Conversely, many Myanmar people commonly think of Caucasians as being the same as Christians.)

The two main streams of Buddhism are Mahayana and Theravada (sometimes called Hinayana). Mahayana Buddhism is mainly found in Tibet, China, Japan, Vietnam and Korea, while Theravada is practised in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. The Myanmar people clearly show a preference for other Theravada Buddhists and Myanmar is well-known for its important centres of learning for Buddhist scriptures and meditation within this tradition. Converts to Buddhism are greatly admired, although there is never a strong push towards conversion as there is in some religions. A popular magazine on Buddhism carries an article every month on converts of various nationalities and gives their reasons for coming to Myanmar as yogis to meditate at Myanmar's well-known meditation centres.

Kan

The Myanmar people believe in the Buddhist concept of *kan* (Myanmar) [karma (Sanskrit), *kamma* (Pali)], according to which good begets good and evil begets evil. Every thought, word or act is believed to have an effect on one's *kan*, which

literally means intention. So it is not simply what we do that influences our lives, but also our intentions behind the deeds. (Refined definitions of the different kinds of karma can be found in most books on Buddhism.)

Some economic and social analysts say the belief in *kan* is the root of poverty in Myanmar. This may be because it is a belief which makes help ineffectual in the long term and proves frustrating to those who would like to teach the poor in Myanmar to help themselves.

Kan is the mother, *kan* is the father, *kan* is our only true possession.
—Buddhist saying

Belief in *kan* is usually labelled a fatalistic attitude towards life, since everything that happens is said to be caused by our actions in a past life which is now beyond our control. Disasters, catastrophes and sudden deaths are all brought about by karma and are therefore accepted. Actually, this is only a layman's perception of karma. Buddhists believe that while one cannot change one's past, it is possible to change the future. In this sense, belief in karma is positive and should not be held responsible for poverty or a lack of positive action to improve the quality of life in Myanmar.

Merits (Kutho) and Defilements (Akutho)

Urging others to do good deeds on the grounds that merit (*kutho*) will accrue is very common and most people are willing to go along with such persuasion. For example, when donations for charity are collected, the donor is often reminded of the merits of *dana* and being charitable (*dana* is the Pali word for 'giving', 'generosity' or 'charity').

Being filial is also part of gaining good merit, as parents (together with teachers) are ranked just after the Triple Gems in order of respect. The Triple Gems comprise the Buddha, the *Dhamma* (his teachings) and the *Sangha* (his disciples the monks). Looking after one's parents is supposed to give great merit, one of them being that such a son or daughter will never become poor.

Together with the belief in karma is the belief in cycles and planes of existence. According to Buddhist philosophy, all

living things go through endless cycles of existence, known as *than-tha-yar* (the Myanmar word for samsara); existence itself is known as *ba wa* in the Myanmar language. Additionally, they move through various planes of existence, of which there are 31. These planes are the lower planes (including hell, animals and ghosts), the human plane and the higher planes of celestial existence. Myanmar people try to acquire *dana* and *sila* merits in order to gain a better existence after death.

Nirvana is the goal of any devout Buddhist who wishes to be freed from the cycle of existence. Charity (*dana*), morality (*sila*) and insight or wisdom (*bhavana*) are the three requirements of the journey to Nirvana. Charity is the most easily accomplished of these, but the Five Precepts of *sila*, namely abstention from killing living things, stealing, lying, sexual immorality and taking intoxicants, are more difficult. Every Buddhist is required to keep them as well as he can. As for the merit of wisdom and insight, rules for meditation (of which there are 42 different methods) must be followed.

> Without slippers and a water gourd, you'll learn a lesson in the summer; without *dana* and *sila*, you'll learn a lesson on your deathbed.
>
> —Myanmar saying

Because *dana* is the most attainable merit, you will see evidence of it everywhere. Alms will be given to monks regularly and donation boxes at the pagodas are nearly always full. On the other hand, there are few facilities for looking after destitute people as charity is believed to bring greatest merit when it is directed towards the wise and morally correct, namely the monks. As for beggars, tramps, orphans and delinquents, the general attitude is that it's all karma!

TWO STREAMS

The political and economic situation in the country affects nearly everyone on a daily basis and has contributed to creating two very distinct outlooks on life in the minds of the people. One of these is very inward-looking, turning to religion and meditation for solace. The other shows little interest in religion but focuses on economic concerns in a desperate struggle to make a living.

Certainly, there appears to be much more interest in Buddhism now than, say, in the 1960s or earlier. More people are interested in meditation centres, which seem to be constantly growing in number and size. Many foreigners also come to these centres from abroad. Books on Buddhism have also grown in popularity as they are now available in simple Myanmar language, where once only those who knew the Pali language could read the scriptures.

SUPERSTITIONS

Myanmar people can be very superstitious, especially the womenfolk. Events will frequently be interpreted as omens and signs and rumours are usually swallowed whole and passed on. This is to some extent due to the dire lack of media for entertainment in Myanmar, which only has state-owned or state-controlled radio, TV and newspapers.

The supernatural has always held a great fascination for the Myanmar people. An appearance of Buddha images with swollen chests caused endless rumours that the images were symbolically reflecting the sad plight of the people. Skeptics who saw the images said that the images had merely been carved that way and the rumours died down after a time. Similarly, the supernatural has been held responsible for many other events and occurrences: logs that float upstream, appearances of pagoda images in the sky, and monks levitating and travelling through the air. Of course, those who have seen these are ready to swear to their validity.

There are also said to be 'man-eating' rivers and lakes, so-called because of the number of drownings that have occurred in those spots. Indeed, rivers, lakes, mountains and forests are believed by many to have spirits who should not be offended. Even J.H. Williams, the author of *Elephant Bill*, describes how he would go along with native customs when entering forests. (Williams is famous for his books on the timber-pulling elephants used in Myanmar.)

> There is perhaps not an [sic] nation in the world so given to superstition as the Burmese.
>
> —Father Vincenzo Sangermano, *The Burmese Empire a Hundred Years Ago* (1893)

'Superstition controls half the life of the ordinary Myanmar people, while the other half is in the hands of either mother or mother-in-law.'

—Ma Thanegi, *The Native Tourist* (2004)

Certain mountains are believed to have particularly powerful spirits. Two such mountains are Mt. Popa and Mt. Kyaik-hti-yo. Believers going to such places will not take along any food that contains meat (especially pork); must not wear certain colours, such as red or black; or say certain things which are considered offensive. Any accidents that occur are believed to be due to offending the spirits by breaking one or the other of the above taboos.

Astrology, palmistry and clairvoyance are extremely popular in Myanmar and are relied on by most people to help make decisions about all aspects of life. Some of the more educated Burmese do, however, consider themselves above such practices and prefer science to pseudo sciences. But, in such cases, the womenfolk around them will probably still consult astrologers on their behalf and do whatever is necessary to avert disasters and bad luck.

The actions that need to be taken after a supernatural prediction are called *yadaya* and are expected to help offset or cancel bad luck. Such actions may include building a footbridge, mending a road, setting some fish free (usually the same number as your age) and doing other kinds of merits. Of course only the astrologer can tell you which type of action counters which kind of bad luck. Any *yadaya* which is extremely difficult or even impossible to perform usually means that you will be unable to avert an oncoming disaster.

Those who consult astrologers are therefore careful to attempt to do whatever is prescribed since they feel that if they do not take the trouble they just may get the bad luck that has been predicted. For the same reason, there are many people who do not dare go to the astrologer because they are too afraid that the *yadaya* will be beyond their power. *Yadaya* are also performed to get the girl or boy of your dreams, for a happy marriage, to get a promotion at work and so on.

Many people who are believed to have clairvoyant powers will find a long line of people on their doorstep at the break of dawn, waiting to have their fortunes told. One well-known woman in Yangon will look at photographs to make the predictions. Another in Bago looks at a cotton shawl while making the predictions and appears to be relating what she can see on this shawl. Another, a nun, seems to hear the predictions in her ears.

Whatever the method, each clairvoyant or astrologer/palmist has a stream of clients who keep him or her in business. Perhaps life in Myanmar is more unpredictable than elsewhere or the people are more insecure, but the country certainly has enough astrologers to fill the demand and there is no end to the list of psychics whom one ought to consult! (See Chapter Four for more on astrological predictions.)

BAMAHSAN CHINN (BEHAVING IN A 'MYANMAR' WAY)

Bamahsan chinn holds great value in Myanmar eyes and being Westernised in one's speech and habits is cause for derision. *Bamahsan chinn* is a complex term and can represent a variety of things. It includes behaving with respect towards elders, being able to recite scriptures (at least the more important ones), being able to converse in idiomatic Myanmar language (which is very difficult and differs greatly from the written word), being indirect and subtle rather than loud and direct, dressing with modesty, being discreet in relations with the opposite sex and generally showing a knowledge of things Myanmar.

Incidentally, a good living example may be found in Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy and prisoner of conscience until 1995. Despite being married to an Englishman and living abroad for many years, the Nobel Prize winner holds immense popularity among the Myanmar people for her patriotism and her adherence to Myanmar values. Anyone else would surely have been written off as Westernised beyond redemption, but to hold onto Myanmar values in a foreign milieu, where it is easy to forget, is highly respected.

Indeed, many expatriate Myanmar are very concerned about preserving their cultural identity. This concern tends to focus on maintaining religious customs, native language and

traditional behaviour as far as possible. These factors are far more important than attempting to preserve ethnic identity through marriage.

However, since being Myanmar is so highly valued, mixed races, such as Eurasians who only speak English, Indians and, to a lesser extent, Chinese are generally looked down on because their customs, language and dress do not allow them to integrate fully into society.

RELATIONSHIPS

In all relationships between superiors and juniors there are set expectations on both sides. For example, parents expect obedience and filial duty, while children expect help and support from parents even into adulthood. Among relatives, the poorer usually expect some form of support or show of concern from the more wealthy. In fact, most breakdowns in family relationships are caused by some upset in these expectations. Common examples are quarrels over inheritances, legacies, 'undesirable' marriages, disrespectful children and disobedience, or uncontrollable behaviour such as kleptomania.

Disinheritance is the usual way parents show their displeasure to their offspring. This is intended to show that they are not responsible for the wayward behaviour of their children. By implication, then, Myanmar parents do not dissociate themselves from their children when they reach adulthood and the dreaded 'loss of face' can be incurred on their account (Refer to 'Face' on page 41). Parents continue to treat their offspring as children, making or trying to make their decisions for them even as adults. On the other hand, many children are angered over the second marriage of a parent as they feel their expectations and 'rights' as a child may be compromised.

Between siblings, the elder demand respect from the younger, while younger brothers and sisters expect all kinds of help from elder siblings.

In employer-employee relationships, juniors will look to their bosses as a father-figure, expecting loans in times of crisis and desperation and a measure of understanding in

times of trouble. Employees will be expected to be loyal and hardworking and employers will generally overlook other faults if these can be obtained.

Between teacher and students, teachers are expected to supply advice, to discipline, to listen to complaints with a sympathetic ear, to advise on alternative employment and even to patch up rocky relationships. Teachers may expect their students to fulfil small errands, and to help with connections and introductions should the student go on to attain important positions in various organisations. Teachers are also expected to behave in a respectful way, for example not to have affairs with younger teachers or students.

Personal behaviour tends to colour social perceptions in Myanmar.

Attitudes to Male/Female Roles

In Myanmar society, males have priority in everything, much the same as in other Asian cultures. This appears to derive from the belief that to be a Buddha one must first be reborn as a man. Thus, if one is born a man there is the possibility of becoming a Buddha, a Supreme Being. It doesn't matter whether he is really interested in becoming one or not. The point is that women cannot.

However, there is no heavy burden on parents when daughters are born as there is no need to pay a dowry to the bridegroom upon marriage. Girls as well as boys are regarded as 'jewels', treasured objects. Nevertheless, girls are expected to look after parents more than boys. If they remain spinsters (this archaic term is still used in Myanmar) they will live with parents and care for them, at the same time usually supporting themselves by working as doctors, teachers, government officials or clerical staff.

When boys are born, the parents rejoice that they will someday gain great merit from entering the boys into novicehood. To be parents of novices and monks is held in great esteem and is capable of bringing good karma.

Boys are lucky in that their mothers, sisters and aunts will pamper them, cooking whatever they wish to eat, giving them pocket money when they are not yet earning much, washing

their clothes for them and tidying up after them. Myanmar women perform endless chores for men, not because they are expected to, but because they generally enjoy lavishing love and care. The result is that most Myanmar men almost have no skill in household management, preferring to leave everything to the women, while they spend most of their time outside the home.

Women are traditionally expected to be demure, self-effacing and unobtrusive. Girls are usually brought up to be gentle, quiet and to move with silent steps. They are not supposed to have opinions or to voice them. One can hardly find a woman in a gathering of men; women tend to group together, their interests being very different from those of men. In public, men and women tend to gather with members of the same sex. Women will go out shopping with other women friends after work, have lunch or watch movies together. Men will gather at tea shops or pubs called "liquor shops" to talk about the latest news and rumours. When they do go out together in public, shows of affection between the sexes are frowned upon and are therefore rarely seen. As Myanmar enters the 21st century, there will probably be more relaxed attitudes.

Friendships

Friendship is valued highly in Myanmar. When old friends who grew up together meet again after a period of separation, the expectation is that the friendship exists exactly as it did before. This applies regardless of the length of separation or changes in circumstances, such as success, wealth, failure or poverty. Friends from the same neighbourhood are as close as relatives and good friends are considered part of the family.

As in many other cultures, competition, bossiness and intrusive behaviour are not expected between friends. Jealousy and anger can ensue, especially over feelings that one friend is closer or more favoured than another.

Friendship also implies being privy to secrets. Some friendships are broken when confidences are not shared and hurt feelings result. Confidantes of influential and important people are especially privileged as some of the importance is perceived as rubbing off on them.

The lines where these expectations meet are rather fuzzy, but overstepping or, indeed, under-stepping the mark will frequently cause upsets in relationships. Where expectations cannot be met, there are sure to be disappointments and feelings of, 'after all the things I've done for you'.

EMOTIONAL PERCEPTIONS

Among the Myanmar, perceptions tend to be emotional rather than rational, and subjective rather than objective.

For example, criticism is nearly always taken as a personal insult. It is also hard for objective analysis to come into personal situations. A marriage-guidance counsellor would never be consulted in a shaky marriage as such a person is considered a total stranger and could not possibly understand the situation as family and friends could. The very idea of consulting a stranger about personal problems is unacceptable, so counsellors of the psychological kind do not exist in large numbers in Myanmar.

Elders or those in authority within the family or community are always considered right and are above criticism from juniors.

Face

Loss of face socially is intolerable and the one who causes it will usually meet with some kind of "penalty". However, losing face is seldom held to be so great that one would commit suicide, as in certain cultures. Myanmar people are generally an easy-going race and seldom hold loss of face as a long-term grievance or vendetta. They can be quite philosophical about circumstances and do not let themselves be upset for long.

Loss of face can be caused by anyone, but particularly by the behaviour of children, subordinates or any kind of junior. Criticism, disagreement and contradiction from a junior is likely to cause a loss of face. Juniors feel *ah-nar-de* (see below) if they criticise seniors. They must save seniors a loss of face at all costs, even when gross or glaring errors are being made by the latter.

Ah-nar-hmu and Ah-nar-de

Ah-nar-de or *ah-nar-hmu* is a feeling that has often been described as a national trait. It is a feeling of not wanting to impose on others, wanting to give in when one can, not wanting to cause trouble or loss of face. For example, when seconds are served at a meal, it is polite to refuse once or twice before being pressed to have some more. To those who are direct, this custom is very tiresome.

The feeling of *ah-nar-de* is also responsible for the refusal to contradict or disagree with those regarded as superior in rank or age. If something must be said, it has to be done in private.

However, older people also feel *ah-nar-de*. For example, parents living with their children will feel it when they fall sick. They will often suffer in silence to avoid causing their children the trouble of having to take them to the doctor or hospital.

Between friends *ah-nar-hmu* (noun) means giving in to each other whenever reasonable requests are made. However, when demands become excessive, the feeling is that the other party is lacking *ah-nar-hmu*.

Ah-nar-hmu causes great difficulties in human relationships and one has to watch how far one goes. Also, it is possible to abuse *ah-nar-hmu* so that a superior may ask a junior to do something and that person will have to do it in spite of not wanting to.

Prevarication, white lies and evasiveness are all part of the *ah-nar-hmu* behaviour. It may seem hypocritical but, among the Myanmar, those who are blunt and direct usually make others cringe. Such direct people are the exception and are not considered very Myanmar in their behaviour.

Empathy

A feeling that also plays a part in Myanmar relationships is that of empathy, referred to as *ko chinn sar-nar-hmu*. The ability to not only sympathise, but actually feel the same way as a friend or member of the family is feeling, helps greatly in consoling others during hard times such as bereavements. Friends are actually expected to be empathetic in crises and saying things that are stoical or lacking in empathy causes ill-will.

Superiors are also expected to show empathy towards their juniors in times of trouble. For example, employers should not assign duties that require husbands and wives to live apart, they should not refuse to give leave when it is needed on emotional grounds and they should try to have realistic expectations of their subordinates in terms of work and achievements.

Generally, the feeling is one of consideration to others.

Gratitude

The concept of never ending gratitude toward those who have helped one in whatever way is another tenet which is very important in Myanmar society. As the saying goes, 'one owes a debt to whoever gave one even a morsel of food to eat'. Thus children are always indebted to parents and especially to the mother.

Similarly, one is indebted to teachers and not just those teachers who taught us in school called *thin-saya* (taught-teacher) but also those other 'teachers' from whom we

The Shwe Dagon Pagoda at night. This magnificent structure in Yangon is one of the most sacred Buddhist sites for the Myanmar. The dome is covered with actual gold plates donated by generations of worshippers.

The city of Yangon lit up at night. The Shwe Dagon Pagoda, located on top of Singuttara Hill, dominates the skyline. Yangon is Myanmar's largest city and the most important commercial centre in the country.

A flower seller at the Zegyo market, Mandalay. The yellow cream on her cheeks is known as ‘thanaka’, obtained from the bark of the thanaka tree which is native to Myanmar. Described as fragrant and cooling on the skin, it is considered indispensable to Myanmar women and to a lesser extent, men and children.

At a *pandal* (marquee) during the Water Festival. Rows of women use hoses to spray people driving past. Sprinkling of water during this period symbolises the washing away of sins and bad luck of the past year and is generally considered great fun as well.

A group of young Buddhist nuns praying at a meditation centre in Yangon. The great majority of Myanmar is Buddhist, and Yangon's many meditation centres are often also visited by Buddhists from abroad.

learnt much by listening to them, by reading what they wrote and looking at their example: these are the *kyar-saya* (heard-teacher) and *myin-saya* (seen-teacher).

Thus, it is important to fulfill one's debt to all these persons in whatever ways one can. One should not be ungrateful.

The End Of An Ingrate

A fable often told to children is about the acrobat who learnt an act or trick with a spear from seeing a crane tossing a fish to eat; when he was asked where he had learnt this he said he hadn't learn it from anyone but had thought of it by himself. Subsequently, he died of a pierced throat.

ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTIONS

Because Myanmar has always been a land of abundance, with creeks and rivers full of fish, plenty of trees with edible leaves and fruit and rice easily grown, Myanmar people do not have much concern for tomorrow. Neither do they give much thought to the day when all of these will be depleted. Trees are cut down at random and wood and water are wasted. Leftover food are thrown away as the Myanmar like to cook fresh food at each mealtime. To some extent, the lack of refrigeration accounts for this habit.

The general perception of the people is that everything that grows in the environment belongs to anyone who can make use of it. Thus, one can see whole branches of flowering trees cut down for their blooms, which are sold as hair decorations or for offerings to the Buddha. Poverty has made this tendency worse so that you may find people cutting the flowers from the hedges along your fence or trying to get at the fruit on your tree. Perhaps this attitude derives from the behaviour of the kings who were absolute monarchs over the country and all its products. V.C. Scott O'Connor (*Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma*) describes how 'The land and what it offered was thus perceived as a giant estate, there for the taking'.

Appreciation of beauty has never been high on the list of Myanmar refinements. To leave a tree full of blossoms and

not to sell a single flower is considered foolish and to view flowers just for their beauty is equally ridiculous.

THE MYANMAR PERSONALITY

The Myanmar people have been variously described as open, gay, informal, childlike and carefree. On the other hand, they have also been described as arrogant, boastful, proud, secretive and paranoid, with extreme distrust of those perceived as rivals or competitors.

Both groups of descriptions are true and seem to depend mainly on situations. If outsiders are involved it seems that the latter traits take over. In other words, all situations involving foreigners are perceived as potentially threatening. Perhaps this is one reason why the country has remained closed for so long.

Rulers of the past have been particularly prone to this type of paranoid behaviour, frequently resorting to murder to rid themselves of rivals and competitors (usually half-brothers and sisters, as the kings had many queens). Murdering uncles, aunts and even fathers was also not uncommon among royalty. Indeed, a Myanmar proverb states that 'When clearing the reeds, one should never overlook the stumps and roots'.

Most murders in Myanmar are said not to be premeditated but rather the result of spur-of-the-moment bursts of anger, when any weapon to hand is seized during an exchange of hot words.

Slights, real or perceived, may be reciprocated with added viciousness or lead to grudges. This may be the result of not treating superiors with due respect; indirect comments which are interpreted as insults; or various gestures and body language which are interpreted as snubs.

The man in the street is generally good-humoured, patient and appears to be easy-going in his attitude. But he is often hurt by criticism, by rejection (especially when he has gone out of his way to do something) and usually will be infuriated by what he regards as presumptuousness or one-up-manship. The latter may include being overtaken on the road, feeling patronised or looked down on, or deliberately snubbed.

However, most Myanmar people are content if they have three meals a day, with rice as the staple. Not everyone wishes to be a millionaire but they do need to have enough to eat and to be able to make a decent living. Being very wealthy is not the aim; leading a morally correct life according to the Five Precepts is more important.

However, as inflation becomes hyperinflation, corruption is inevitable. Much of this may be due to the fact that the scale of pay used during the years after independence (1948) was only adjusted in the late 1980s. The adjustment simply involved the printing of more money and this was not proportionate to the increase in the production of goods and services.

Petty theft and pilfering, especially of objects such as paper, pens, clips, neon lights and switches, is not uncommon, particularly in government offices. Even manhole covers have been known to mysteriously disappear. Though the Myanmar acknowledge this as morally wrong, it tends to be rationalised as being done out of necessity and the need to survive; people often quote the Myanmar proverb "You can only keep your morals or precepts if your stomach is full" as justification.

Clans and gangs, popular in other Asian cultures, are not common in Myanmar as it is generally each for himself. The people are usually very individualistic and it is commonly remarked that two Myanmar persons can be friends but three will be enemies.

This individualism is culturally acceptable as there is no great emphasis on carrying on the family line, producing male heirs or worshipping ancestors. Graves are not particularly maintained and, in fact, it appears that the Myanmar are reluctant to visit cemeteries unless absolutely necessary. Cremation is also more common so that there are no graves to be maintained. Any remembrance of deceased family members is mostly through performing good deeds in their honour and holding 'merit transference' ceremonies which involve feeding monks, giving alms and doing other charitable acts.

Usually, even the ashes or bones are not collected, as for Buddhists, the body after death is considered worthless.

URBAN VERSUS RURAL

You may not have a chance to meet Myanmar villagers as travel is permitted to certain areas only, at least at the present time. If you do manage to get around, the kind of people you are likely to meet in urban areas differ considerably from those in the villages.

The urban educated are mostly those who have graduated from one of the universities. They are likely to be professionals such as accountants, engineers, doctors, teachers and lawyers. Some will also be clerical staff, but even these may have a degree as education is highly valued and everyone will aim for further education if they have the chance. However, employment is difficult and most graduates have to work in whatever jobs are available. Many degree holders and professionals are even in daily wage jobs, supplementing their income by moonlighting.

In government jobs, it used to be common to find staff away from their desks most of the time, especially under the socialist government when many people were involved in party activities and could produce this excuse at any time.

It was usually the case that the person concerned would be preoccupied with personal business, such as queuing up at some store to buy something that had a resale value and then reselling that item on the black market for a much higher price. Queuing was the order of the day because of goods being sold on a rationed basis and, consequently, a great deal of time was spent away from work. All the energy needed for this activity seems to have been far more worthwhile than working at a regular job with a very low pay.

In the urban areas, there are congestion and overcrowding. Life is hectic, especially as most city-dwellers feel the pressures of struggling to make a living more keenly than villagers. Of course, young people from the rural areas are drawn to the towns and to Yangon.

In Myanmar, a number of villages are grouped into village tracts. Being a rural country, only eight out of 400 towns have a population of more than 100,000 and only Yangon, Mandalay and Mawlamyine would qualify as cities.

Rural people live a simple life, as they have done for many generations. Agriculture is their main livelihood, although in the border areas they may also trade in the black market. Traditional villagers are an older generation, most of whom lived through World War II. The kind of values they hold are more distinctly Buddhist: belief in karma, in hell and strict adherence to the Five Precepts.

The seasons probably define villagers' lives more than anything else as livelihoods depend on agriculture. Sometimes a living can be made from other traditional crafts like pottery and weaving.

Leisure and entertainment for the villagers consists mainly of ceremonies for novitiation and monkhood, the pagoda festivals, touring theatre groups and open-air movies. Most of these activities take place during the cool, dry seasons, before or after the rainy agricultural season.

Generally, the life of villagers has been the same for centuries. Radios, TVs, movies, cars and bicycles are probably the only symbols of modernity. Villagers, however, remain alienated from politics, not knowing who their leaders are or

how they are governed. What is more important to them is that a good price is offered for their crops so they can make a reasonable living.

Urban Homes

An average urban Myanmar home is raised on four posts and has a concrete base. It has two or three rooms which are usually partitioned only with plywood or asbestos sheets that have cotton curtains in place of doors.

The main room, as you climb up a short flight of steps, is the living room, which often contains an altar. This may be in a recess in one wall or on a small shelf at head level. Here the family's Buddha image is kept surrounded by flowers in vases, votive water cups and candles. In the morning, the family will also offer fruit, small cups of cooked rice or other food. Because the altar is in this room it is usual for guests to remove their shoes before entering. Beds in the house are arranged so the head will point towards the altar, or at least so that the feet will not do so. (See more on the head and feet in Chapter Four.)

A set of light wooden chairs with woven cane seats is for guests. There is usually a small coffee table and peg tables.

A typical Buddhist shrine that may be often seen in Myanmar.

Plastic rather than fresh flowers are used for decoration, more from economy than preference. Instead of paintings and pictures, the Myanmar like to decorate their walls with calendars and photos of deceased grandparents, parents and graduate children in their caps and gowns. They particularly love calendars, especially of colourful foreign scenes, pets or flowers. Calendars make a good gift as they are only sold at New Year on the black market (i.e. the sidewalks of streets).

Most homes have a showcase, a sideboard with glass doors, in which various dolls, souvenirs and presents are displayed. Sometimes dinnersets and coffeesets, new pots, kettles and even electrical appliances may be put on show.

You may also notice that the refrigerator is kept in the dining room. This is because the kitchen is usually too far away or is too small for it. Sometimes it is also because servants are just too rough to be allowed to handle such an expensive appliance.

Guests are often entertained with photo albums. The Myanmar are very fond of having photos taken at pagodas, parks and beaches, and they love to show them to friends. Women and girls like to strike poses when having their photos taken. Indeed, photographers can make a modest living from hanging around pagodas and public places.

Villages

Every village has a monastery, cemetery and sometimes a school. However, clinics or hospitals would be in the nearest town.

Each village traditionally has a headman who has to solve social problems such as quarrels and fights, and liaise with government authorities.

A typical village hut is made of thatch and may have walls of bamboo matting. A wooden house, often with a corrugated iron roof, is for the more affluent. Some old houses in the villages are splendid sights, with whole tree trunks for the main pillars. Traditionally, mahogany or teak wood was used for housing but such wood is now difficult to find. All of the houses and huts are raised metres above the ground because of floods during rainy seasons.

In recent times, many villages show a noticeable lack of young people. This is because, if parents can afford it, youngsters are sent to the towns and cities to study at colleges and universities or to learn a 'modern' trade. Alternatively, the young are lured to the cities in search of work and better prospects.

Family Life

Family ties are strong in Myanmar and families tend to be extended rather than nuclear. It is not uncommon to find grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins all living under the same roof. Privacy is, therefore, minimal. Each member of the family is expected to contribute in some way towards either the expenses or the running of the household.

In the family, the father is usually a distant but loving figure; the traditional and ideal attitude of children towards parents has been formulated as "love, fear, respect". It is the mother who is usually closest to the children, together with aunts (usually her sisters). Most approaches to the father will be channelled through the mother, although for important or difficult issues the mother will often defer decisions with the common saying, 'Ask your father'. While the father rarely gets involved in bringing up children or domestic problems, he will take the lead in leisure activities for the family which usually consist of outings to pagodas, monasteries, parks and the cinema.

The day-to-day running of the household, including expenses, is done by the mother and any other female relatives staying in the same home. The whole month's salary will be handed over by the father to the mother who will divide the sum according to various expenses. These often include giving parents-in-law a monthly allowance, making charity donations to important causes and handling children's expenses.

Relatives who come to visit, for however long, are welcomed. Indeed, they are expected to stay with the family as, among the Myanmar people, hotels are for foreigners. However, in return for this hospitality they are expected to help wherever they can. They may show their appreciation

by looking after the children, teaching them, helping with meals or going along with the mother when she shops. Any domestic staff will also do the same, either for a salary or in return for lessons, clothes and meals, all of which they may have struggled to obtain back home in their own villages.

In urban areas, there are now many smaller nuclear families consisting of the parents, child and maid. Managing such a family may seem easier, with fewer mouths to feed and certainly more privacy. But, in fact, such an arrangement often leads to a lower quality of life for all concerned as working parents struggle to get by without the help, advice and pooled contributions of an extended family.

WOMEN IN MYANMAR

The role of women in Myanmar society has often been discussed in books. Myanmar women have been described as 'self-possessed, confident and capable'. *The World of Burmese Women* by Daw Mi Mi Khaing is a comprehensive account of various aspects of the life of Myanmar women.

Their role is perceived by Westerners to be equal to the male role, although supportive and complementary to it rather than in competition. There are no movements for women's rights since education is readily available, women can enter any profession they wish and can own property. They do not need to change their names after marriage and, in the event of divorce, half of the property accumulated after the marriage can be claimed. If they accept a role a step behind their menfolk, they do so freely and willingly.

It is only in religious matters that women have to take second place to men. However, even here they are still able to do important work as providers, carers and meal planners at monasteries and meditation centres. They are not allowed to climb up to the higher levels of the pagodas, cannot enter some parts of the monastery, and the Buddhist nuns just do not have the same high status as the monks.

Education is very highly valued by parents, so daughters are educated right up to tertiary level if it can be afforded.

> A Burmese woman going about her business is more than a match for any man.
>
> —Sir James George Scott

Sexual equality within medicine and other prestigious professions is not an issue as women receive the same salaries and privileges as men. In the medical profession, women tend to become obstetricians, gynaecologists, paediatricians (particularly appropriate because of the taboo on touching between the sexes) or eye surgeons and dentists. Women surgeons, architects and engineers are rather few but these professions are still open to those who wish to enter. The legal profession is not a viable career at present since it has been superseded by a system of directives and orders from the government.

Statistics show that more than half the population at Myanmar universities consists of women.

Women also tend to obtain high marks at college by dint of sheer hard work. They are also able to enter the more prestigious courses and colleges, such as medical college, under a system which selects university entrants by marks alone. Unfortunately, although doctors are still in demand and have considerable earning power, the lack of good practices and the scarcity of drugs and medical equipment have meant frustrating situations for medics.

Maternity leave is usually one and a half months before birth and one to two months after delivery. Most mothers try to work as long as they can before the birth so that they can take most of their entitled leave afterwards.

Myanmar women are characteristically shrewd and practical but do not make pretensions towards intellectual matters. It is generally left to the men to gather and discuss politics and social matters. Women tend towards the telling of anecdotes and practical matters, such as recipes and discussions about problems with children and property matters.

Traditionally, the most valued combination in marriage was that of the husband in a government job that gave status and prestige, and the wife supplementing the husband's income by running a home business, such as making preserved fruits or cheroot (local cigarettes). It is also not uncommon for women to act as moneylenders or brokers for the sale of jewellery. Indeed, for most Myanmar women, business seems to come naturally.

This is still true, but at the present time these job choices are increasingly changing due to the fact that government

careers are no longer as highly paid as they used to be. Therefore, both men and women are now entering business ventures or looking for a way to do so by searching for contacts. Most are interested in trade rather than production or agriculture. Trade is perceived as a lucrative source of income because of the precedence of the black market which earned considerable fortunes for those who were willing to take risks. Manufacturing is seen to be time-consuming and requiring more skill and expertise. It takes time to establish contacts in this field and the whole process from raw materials to finished product requires great patience. It seems that most people are very impatient because of the long years of hardship under the socialist system. Manufacturing and agriculture both need years of input and labour before substantial returns can be seen. The merchant marine is also another lucrative occupation and young men take seamen exams to board ship and earn incomes paid in dollars. (Refer to 'Foreign Exchange' on page 59)

For single and unskilled young women from the villages, domestic work is the most common vocation beyond agricultural labour. Nevertheless, if manufacturing was developed in Myanmar, a trend for these young girls to be drawn to factory work is very likely. This is because domestic jobs offer no real rights to the employee who, in return for long hours, is rarely given fixed leave, medical insurance or even much freedom of movement for fear that they will make contacts with the outside world.

ATTITUDES TO FOREIGNERS

In the past, the Myanmar kings considered their country the centre of the earth. Their court has been described as the most arrogant in the world. In fact, in 1287 King Narathihapate executed a whole delegation representing the Chinese ruler Kublai Khan. However, he eventually had to flee Kublai Khan's armies, thus earning himself the name Tayoke-pyay-min or 'the king who fled from the Chinese'.

Foreigners are generally well-treated as long as they are only visiting and not perceived as a threat. If prejudice exists, it is chiefly towards South Asians. This problem appears

Stingy Chittee

A very stingy person is known as a '*chittee*' the Myanmar word for Chettiar.

to have stemmed from the large-scale migration of Indian labour into the country during the British colonial period. Later, frequent clashes between Indians and Myanmar took place. Even now, the Chettiars (a class of Indian moneylenders) are seen as the epitome of stinginess in Myanmar as they are blamed for making many landlords forfeit their land when loans could not be repaid. Myanmar people tend to think of Indians as being all the same, unable to distinguish between the many kinds of Indian peoples, for example between Tamil and Hindu; perhaps the Sikhs are the most distinguishable because of their turbans.

Despite being a British colony for about 100 years, the majority of Myanmar did not have any strong desire to ape the British or to be Anglophiles. The only exception to this was a small group of Western-educated elite. These often included doctors and engineers who would dress in Western clothes for work. However, this applied only to the men; Myanmar women have never worn dresses (called *ga-won* from gown), despite living under the British. Even today, the Western-educated may speak English quite often and show a taste for things Western in their home decor or in their preferences for food and drink, but essentially they never give up their Myanmar identity. Religion-wise, Buddhism was never abandoned nor Christianity embraced with the arrival of Western education and Westernisation.

Nevertheless, the arts, literature and theatre have all flourished since Western influences crept in. This has generally taken the form of adaptations and modifications to the Myanmar language under the influence of English, and novels and poetry began to be written in new and more direct language. However, extensive writings in English itself are not too apparent.

In the rural areas Western influence is even less. English would probably be understood, but only those words that have crept into the Myanmar language might be spoken. 'Yes', 'no', 'thank you' and 'sorry' are quite commonly used.

One still might encounter awe among the rural Myanmar over Western inventions such as the telephone, television, camera and cassette recorder, but there is certainly no great desire to behave like Westerners. In other words, Western behaviour is not perceived as worthy of imitation.

Many of the more Westernised Myanmar tend to lead double lives, behaving appropriately for the situation and setting. Some even have two accents to deal with two vastly different sets of people.

Those of mixed cultural origins, such as Eurasians with a mix of British-Indian or British-Myanmar blood, were usually looked down on. Most of these people left Myanmar in the 1960s and early 1970s (as did many Indians and Chinese who had formed a large part of the private sector). They were not inclined to speak Myanmar, preferred to speak English and wear Western clothes, and therefore could not be assimilated. The general feeling toward them was that they wished to appear Western because the West was more developed—an accusation that they were attempting to rise above their station.

Others of mixed blood, like the Sino-Myanmar or Indo-Myanmar, are on the whole rather well assimilated with Myanmar communities. They wear Myanmar dress, speak Myanmar and have adopted Myanmar names.

PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS FOREIGNERS

The many restrictions on contacts with the outside world means that foreigners are always regarded as foreigners per se. Asians can blend in but Caucasians in particular stick out like sore thumbs and may be followed around by idle young people who will find everything they do most interesting, just like a show being put on for their benefit. Especially in public places, there are always groups of such people around. It is certainly very hard to become part of the crowd in Myanmar, given the rarity of tourists.

Staring is also something you will have to put up with. The Myanmar will stare at each other and at anything unusual, even the handicapped or deformed. They like to gather and watch fires burning, car accidents and other mishaps and may not

help in any way but just watch what's happening at the scene —probably to be used later as teashop conversation topics.

There appears to be a great fascination and awe for things foreign but this is coupled with distrust or a watchful tolerance. One should remember that a whole generation of Myanmar people has reached its mid-twenties without having set eyes on many foreigners or had any interaction with them. For them the only knowledge of things foreign comes from television, translated books or magazine articles written by those who have access to foreign literature of some kind.

Some of these articles and books are quite poorly translated. One comes across guinea pigs translated as "pigs from Guinea" and grapefruit juice as synonymous with "grape juice"!

Expectations of Foreigners

On the other hand, foreigners are also seen as links with the outside world. They are therefore perceived as sources for finding jobs abroad, as couriers to and from the country and also as providers of highly valued consumer items (especially ballpoint pens, T-shirts, chocolates, cosmetics and books).

Of course, hardly every foreigner who visits can fulfill all of these expectations, but one should be aware that they seem to exist behind most contacts that are made.

In business, foreigners are perceived as having unlimited funds, as having endless knowledge to teach locals all the newest techniques, systems and methods and, of course, as being morally loose.

There is no doubt that as the number of Myanmar going abroad grows and the number of visitors to Myanmar does likewise, the extremes in attitude towards foreigners and things foreign will change. People will begin to see that foreign places have their good points as well as their bad, and that Myanmar itself is just the same.

The Meaning of 'Closed'

The above-mentioned perceptions are perpetuated because Myanmar has been closed to foreign visitors for decades. It is usually very hard for Westerners, who are used to ideas of

openness, democracy and human rights, to imagine what 'closed' really implies. In the case of Myanmar, from 1970s to the late 1980s, 'closed' meant that visas were granted to foreign visitors only for brief periods of a week or two and then only specific areas of the country could be visited. Visas of up to a month are available now but there are still restrictions on the places that can be visited. In this way, the numbers of tourists and other visitors to Myanmar have been very limited.

Those Myanmar who emigrated and took citizenship in other countries were also not allowed to visit the country even on humanitarian grounds, such as the death of a parent. It was only in the 1990s that such overseas Myanmar-born persons were able to return to Myanmar for visits. There is the general perception toward those who leave the country that they are somehow not loyal to the country.

In the past, the Myanmar people were also not allowed to hold passports permanently so they cannot travel freely but must apply for them when they wish to travel abroad and have to pay considerable amounts of tea money to get through a bureaucratic maze of numerous officials to see and many forms to fill. And they have to surrender their passports when they return home. Now they are allowed to hold their

ordinary passport and apply for a D form when they want to travel out of the country. A special type of passport called a business passport allows the holder to continue to keep the passport on return but for that the holder must have a business to represent so a company has to be formed. It appears that there are many ingenious ways to get around the rules and regulations.

In terms of foreign business, there has been virtually no interest in obtaining foreign investment. The socialist government was more preoccupied with self-sufficiency, so foreign entrepreneurs were few and far between. Only since the late 1980s and early 1990s has the government sought foreign investors actively.

Another way in which Myanmar is closed is in the lack of availability of media of any kind. Imports of books and magazines have been so limited that they reach only a selected few and, then again, only those with an English education (namely graduates up to the mid-1960s) can read English with proficiency. Bookshops selling English books are few. The ones that do exist in the big cities sell or loan novels and magazines rather than textbooks, technical books or nonfiction titles of general interest. Consequently, there is a great thirst for books. However, gifts of books from abroad are never likely to reach their destination but end up on the streets to be peddled at black market prices.

There is one English daily newspaper which carries only 'safe' news items. *The Myanmar Times*, a partly foreign-owned newspaper comes out once a week in Myanmar and English languages. There are also just a few TV stations. Satellite news is shown but only the more 'neutral' news items; news about riots and demonstrations are never shown. The real link the people have with the rest of the world is the radio—the *BBC*, *VOA*, *RFA* (*Radio Free Asia*) and *DVB* (*Democratic Voice of Burma*, broadcast from Norway). Those who can afford it have installed special antenna for receiving cable TV.

It appears that everyone listens to the radio avidly. In fact, news in Myanmar is so dull that newspapers are said to be read mainly for the obituaries. Other articles mostly cover meetings of government leaders and a few items of foreign

news translated into Myanmar. Most news items are so heavy on political rhetoric that they fail to be meaningful, although this is not as bad as in the days of the socialist period when a good deal of Marxist terms like 'exploitation of the people', 'working class' and 'profiteering' were used.

Mail from abroad is usually censored and many letters are received stuck back with glue. People, of course, never write or say anything of importance in mail or over the phone. They all appear to have other means to circumvent the system.

The Black Market

The black market is perhaps one of the few industries that have actually flourished during the closed years. This is because the borders with India, China and Thailand are extensive and porous, with many passes through the mountain ranges. In fact, due to the poor quality and lack of government-produced goods, many consumers are thankful for the existence of the black market, without which they would hardly have had anything to wear, use, eat or drink.

Consumer articles of all types are therefore in great demand, from T-shirts, Levi's jeans and Reebok shoes to cosmetics and lace materials. These articles can all be found on the black market, as long as you can afford the extortionate prices. Of course, the black marketeers make fortunes from their activities and, despite the doubtful origins of their wealth, they have fast become a class of powerful nouveau riche.

Foreign Exchange

The F.E. or 'Effee' is a magic word in Myanmar. As it is frequently bandied about, you may wonder what it actually means. It is, in fact, an abbreviation for 'foreign exchange', which is always at a premium, even though it is officially illegal to own any within the country. As stated in Chapter One, visitors are given foreign exchange certificates at banks, but the reality is (at least at the present time) that on the black market the US dollar fetches about K 1,000 or more!

Anybody who has a chance to go abroad is therefore regarded as extremely lucky and it is assumed that he is sure to make a fortune! The latter preconceived notion

makes nearly every youth long to become seamen as salaries would be paid in valuable F.E. A scholarship awarded to a civil servant by some foreign agency is to be greatly coveted and competitively vied for.

These extremes in attitude are the natural results of living in a place so isolated from neighbouring countries that the latter have come to be conceived as a kind of financial paradise. Of course, some Myanmar do have contacts with foreign countries, either through business or relatives who have migrated. Many aspire to live, be educated or work abroad. But generally such people have a high standard of education and are living in the larger cities. The majority of people, especially those living in rural areas, does not care about or know much about foreign places, people and things. It would not make a great difference to them whether they consumed foreign products or not, as essentials are more in need.

A Myanmar Diaspora?

The Myanmar people love their country and it was rare that they would leave their country in the past. But since the 1990s due to economic and political reasons among others, there are now many Myanmar abroad, in places far from Myanmar such as Jamaica, South Africa and New Zealand. There are the many illegal migrants who just walked over the borders into the countries surrounding Myanmar. Many young people of university-going age from wealthy families can also be found studying in Singapore and Bangkok as the universities in Myanmar are often closed and the curricula is of lower standards. Those with relatives in the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom have gone to join their kin where possible. Some women such as nurses are able to find jobs abroad while some may end up as domestics, but still most of those who leave are able to remit some money home. Remittances are not made through banks but mostly use a system called *hundi*, where the money is given at one end in foreign exchange and delivered in Myanmar in local currency at the desired address to the person the remittance is meant for.

Every family would like to have at least one family member working abroad in order to be able to keep up a reasonable standard of living. As a result of the many people leaving to go abroad either for study or for work, in many homes in both towns and villages there will be only the elderly parents remaining with the younger children or grandchildren and more women than men left.

NAMES

Myanmar names can be very confusing to visitors as certain prefixes and honorifics are required. The Myanmar generally have no surname or family name and you will come across various combinations of names which will totally confuse you. For example there may be two people, one called U Khin Thein and another called U Thein Khin; or a husband and wife, one called U Aye Hla and the other Daw Hla Aye.

How can foreigners cope with such names? First, let's look at how they are chosen.

The Naming System

Traditionally, the Myanmar choose names for their children according to the day of the week on which a child is born. Each day of the week is assigned certain letters of the Myanmar alphabet. Some common names for each day are:

Monday	*Kyaw*, *Khin*, *Kyin*, *Kyi*, *Ngwe* (pronounced 'Ngway').
Tuesday	*San*, *Sann*, *Su*, *Soe*, *Nyi*, *Nyein*, *Zaw*.
Wednesday	*Shwe* (pronounced 'Shway'), *Lin*, *Win*, *Hla*, *Yee* (also spelled *Yi*), *Yin*.
Thursday	*May*, *Ba*, *Mya*, *Myat*, *Maung*, *Myint*, *Myo*, *Min*, *Moe*.
Friday	*Than*, *Thant*, *Thein*, *Thaung*, *Thinn*, *Thaw*, *Han*.
Saturday	*Tin*, *Tun* (pronounced 'toon'), *Nu*, *Nwe*.
Sunday	*Ohn*, *Aye*, *Ee*, *Aung*.

Myanmar names are formed through a combination of these names of the week. Certain days of the week are also thought to be compatible. For example, a girl born on Thursday could be named Myint Myint San as Thursday and Tuesday are compatible. A boy could be called Myo Tun, Thursday and Saturday being compatible.

For the purpose of finding out on which day of the week a person was born there is a calendar book which lists 100-year periods and shows the Myanmar lunar calendars as well. This volume is produced from time to time to include the latest years.

However, not all Myanmar parents will follow this naming system. Some will consult an astrologer who will help in choosing the most auspicious name for their child, according to the time of birth. Names can also be changed in mid-life when some severe misfortune or bad luck affects a person. Changes in names are announced in the newspaper and registration cards can hold a number of aliases if a person has frequently changed his/her name! It's certainly a confusing system, especially when you meet acquaintances or friends who no longer have the same name you previously knew them by.

The father's name or a part of it may sometimes be included in the child's name. For example, U Thein Aung's son may be named Aung Win and his daughter Hla Hla Thein. It is very unlikely that you would find a father and son with exactly the same name. You may, however, find a husband and wife with the same name or a reversal of the same name, such as U Tin Hla being married to Daw Hla Tin. This is certainly confusing, but it is usually only a coincidence. A married woman does not change her name upon marriage.

An Exception To The Rule

In the case of Aung San Suu Kyi, there is an exception to the rule as the whole father's name has been placed at the front. Kyi, which is part of the mother's name (Daw Khin Kyi), has also been included, while her own name, Suu, is in the middle (Suu is derived from her grandmother's name, Su.) The reason for placing her father's name at the front is because he was a national leader and hero.

Western Names

During the colonial period and early post-independence years it was usual for Myanmar children to have English as well as Myanmar names. This was especially the case for those who went to missionary schools where foreign priests and nuns would choose English names so that they could be more easily remembered and pronounced.

Shirley Temple, the actress, appears to have inspired a whole crop of Myanmar Shirleys. There also are many Elisabeths and Margarets, while George, Michael, Peter and John were quite common names chosen for males in urban areas.

Some families have also developed the habit of calling their children Baby and Sonny, which can sound quite odd when they are addressed as Auntie Baby and Uncle Sonny in later life.

Trends

From the mid-1960s to the present day, the trend has been for children to have only Myanmar names, as anything of a foreign nature has been strongly discouraged by the government.

Some male children are given the names of historically important people or those of courtiers and royalty, all of which differ from the names commoners had during monarchical times.

Among Christian families, Christian names are commonly used. The Kayin, who were converted to Christianity by the earliest missionaries, usually choose Biblical names such as Moses, Joseph, Daniel, Mary or Ruth.

Honorifics

These must be placed in front of names to indicate status or rank. The honorifics change according to the status of an individual.

Wives also address their husbands as '*Ko*' or '*Maung*'. Cousins are brothers or sisters 'one or two wombs separated' and are also addressed as *Ko* or *Ko Ko*, *Maung Maung*, *Nyi Nyi*, *Ma Ma* and *Nyi Ma Lay*. *Ko* is used for older brothers/male older cousins. *Ma Ma* is used for older sister/older female cousins. *Maung* is used when it is a brother/male cousin younger than a female. *Nyi* is used when referring to a brother/male cousin younger than a male.

	Male	Female
child	*Maung* (abbr. *Mg*)	*Ma*
young adult	*Ko*	*Ma*
working adult	*U* (pron. 'oo' not 'you')	*Daw*
teacher or boss	*Saya*	*Sayama*

(Note that *U* means uncle and *Daw* means aunt.)

Other honorifics that you may come across are ethnic titles of status:

	Male	Female
Shan royalty	*Sao* (Myanmar *Saw*)	*Sao* (Myanmar *Saw*)
Shan	*Sai*	*Nang*
Kayin	*Saw*	*Nan*
Mon	*Mahn*, *Mehm* or *Nai*	Mi
Chin	*Sai*	(no female equivalent)
Kachin ruler	*Duwa*	(no female equivalent)

Excessive pressure to be Myanmar has resulted in the addition of *U* and *Daw* to the above prefixes. For example a Kayin employee, Saw Tha Htoo, might be called U Saw Tha Htoo in the office, although the prefix *U* is actually redundant here.

Sometimes you will see the following prefix titles conferred upon government officials or members of state as a token of recognition for long or meritorious service:

Maha Thray Sithu
Sithu
Thiri Pyan Chi
Wunna Kyaw Htin
Naing-ngant Gon-yi (placed at the end of the name, in brackets)

Difficulties of the Naming System

In filling up forms it is quite common for Myanmar citizens to be asked to give the names of grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters. Foreigners asked to fill up similar documents when applying for a visa cannot understand the need to know the names of their entire family as usually only the Christian names would vary.

Outside Myanmar, a simple act like trying to call a Myanmar friend at a hotel can turn into an ordeal when one doesn't know how he may have registered himself. The computer system may have even filed him under U and his wife under Daw. For example, if one U Thein Aung considers his surname to be Aung and another U Thein Aung considers the whole name Thein Aung to be the surname, they would be filed under the letters A and T respectively. Airlines, hotels and hospitals abroad have even been known to file women under Daw and men under U which is equivalent to filing them under Mrs, Miss or Mr!

Who are You?

As Myanmar society has been rather immobile up to the present, it has generally been possible to place a person and establish his identity despite the lack of family names. The usual way to do this is to ask a person which town he comes from, who his parents are, what they do and so on. Whenever we talked about our school friends our parents would always ask whose children they were and we were usually unable to answer this question as we didn't know who their parents were but our parents wanted to know any way.

Some successful people put the name of the province or town of birth in front of their names. For example, Kanbawza Khin Hlaing (a well-known doctor and writer), has the old name for the Shan states as a prefix. Similarly, Pantanaw U Khant (brother of former UN Secretary General U Thant) puts his home town in front of his name. This brings honour and recognition to one's place of birth as well as establishes identity. Many authors and poets have used this kind of prefix

My name is Ba, Shwe Ba. A local version of secret agent 007 James Bond's famous line, using a well-known Myanmar action star's name.

in combination with their names or pseudonyms. Obituaries will also state the town of origin of the deceased to be sure of identity.

As education is so highly valued it is also quite common to find the word *Tekkatho*, meaning 'university', in front of many names, thus showing that the person is a graduate. One well-known actor, who has since passed away, was known as Collegian Ne Win because he went to college and also made a famous movie entitled *Collegian*. Some graduates use the prefix *Theippan*, meaning 'science', showing that they either specialise in science writing or are trained as scientists.

Even though such identification clues are attached to names, it is still very common to find large organisations full of employees with the same name. In some companies, personnel even have to be given numbers to avoid confusion! In one organisation where there were many U Maung Maung, they were given numbers and the person who was known as U Maung Maung (5) was fondly called Maung Maung Fish by his colleagues because the word '*ngah*' means the number five as well as fish.

HUMOUR

Myanmar people are naturally fun-loving and even in extremely hard times or crises they can still find something to laugh about. Jokes of a political nature have been in abundance in recent times. This appears to be the common way of getting rid of any frustrations felt about the establishment.

Anecdotes and storytelling are common ways of relieving boredom and frustration. Sitting around a teapot and drinking endless cups of tea while exchanges take place is a common leisure pursuit. Contrary to the machismo of other cultures, jokes do not normally revolve around sexual conquests or exploits.

Since the Myanmar language is monosyllabic, it lends itself easily to puns and spoonerisms. Puns are the most

common jokes since most words have two or three meanings. For example, two people make a bet that one will jump off a balcony in the event of losing the bet. What he will really do is take a chair onto the balcony and lower it, since the words for 'jump' and 'chair' are the same.

Similarly the word for 'teeth' and 'go' are the same, so it's common to hear the lament that visits to dentists are never ending, because one has to 'go' again and again.

The Joke's On You!

A famous comedian, Zarganar (whose name means 'tweezers'), was in jail for a long time because of his brilliant jokes and skits at the expense of the government. One of the most famous concerns a government official who visited him in prison with the news that he would be released if he stopped telling jokes about the government. The story goes that Zarganar was challenged by the official to make up a joke on the spot. In reply, he asked for a newspaper, a plastic mug and a bucket of water. Holding the newspaper in one hand, he pushed the floating mug down into the water with the other, cursing, "This stupid mug just keeps on reappearing." The joke was that it was the official's face on the front page of the newspaper!

Jokes about inflation and the standard of living in Myanmar are also popular. One famous anecdote tells of a visitor to Myanmar who first made a phone call to London and then one to hell. When he asked the operator how much they cost, the call to hell was much cheaper than the one to London. He couldn't understand this logic until the operator explained that the call to hell was classified as a local call.

Similarly, when there were rumours in the 1970s about Myanmar joining ASEAN (Myanmar joined in 1997), people said the country would have to change its name to 'Burmasia' to be in line with countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. The joke was that 'Burmasia' sounds like *bar-may-sha*, a phrase which literally means 'whatever you want or ask for is expensive and cannot be found'.

Cartoons are also very clever in their comments on current times. Many make digs at the extortionate price of common food and groceries or the characteristic of

Myanmar women to compete with each other, similar to the Western idea of 'keeping up with the Joneses'.

Spoonerisms

Government and civil service personnel are sent to a place called Phaunggyi, where there is a school for indoctrination and military training, an experience so universally dreaded that many will even threaten resignation to avoid being sent there. When they return, the course participant is said to have graduated from Phaunggyi-hsinn which can be turned around to *phin gyi saung*, meaning a big twisted backside!

A current spoonerism going around is *ta yah ah htoke*, meaning to meditate, which has been turned around to *ta yoke ah htah*, meaning to depend on the Chinese.

Some words in English sound like bad words in the Myanmar language (although this must be true in every language). Thus, Myanmar people may swear and then pretend they were speaking English.

Teasing

Teasing is actually a sign of affection although some inveterate teasers can tease till their victims cry. However, teasing generally implies intimacy and closeness. Friends like to tease each other over mistakes, clumsiness, childhood escapades or about boyfriends or girlfriends.

You may also be teased if your Myanmar friends like you and if you are close to them. You should take it as a compliment which shows their affection for you rather than as an insult. There is usually no malice behind their teases. If there were, they would generally say bad things about you behind your back!

Insults

As far as animal insults go, being compared to a dog is the worst. An S.O.B. label will also anger the person to whom it is attached because it insults his mother more than himself. People who behave stupidly are compared to cows.

Swear words are used by the less educated and less refined, and are likened to 'fishmonger's talk'.

More Than a Health Risk!

The ultimate gesture of contempt is spitting, either really doing it or just symbolically making the sound 'twee'.

Old-fashioned parents may do it when their children do something which they really disapprove of or when there's a quarrel and a hot exchange of words.

DRESS

Myanmar is one of the few countries left in Southeast Asia where locals still continue to wear traditional dress. Most neighbouring countries have forsaken traditional dress for western skirts and trousers, wearing traditional outfits only for special occasions and ceremonies.

For ladies, traditional dress consists of a sarong, or *longyi* or *htamein* (also *htami*) and a short waist-length blouse. The sarong is made of material stitched in a circular fashion, with a black cloth for a waist band. It is folded in front to form a deep pleat and tucked in at the side, either right or left. Traditionally, they were worn ankle-length but now may be calf-length or shorter. The traditional blouse has an overlapping front, rather like an intern's uniform, and this flap is buttoned up at the side.

For the men, the sarong is usually patterned with checks or stripes, never with the flowers or solid colours that the women wear. The men will wear the sarong with an ordinary Western-style shirt or one with a small upright collar similar to the Chinese jacket. The shirts may or may not be tucked in and the men always tie their sarong in a knot in front.

The sarong is a practical garment that serves many purposes. When bathing at the public well, women can pull it over their breasts and bathe; it can be turned around if dirtied or stained; it can be used to wipe a sweaty face; it makes sitting down on the floor very easy when paying respects to monks and elders; and it can be loosened after a big meal or to cool one's legs on a hot day. Perhaps best of all, the sarong allows one to get slim or grow stout without the need for alteration.

On formal occasions and at weddings, the head gear for men is a kind of hat made of silk with a loose flap at the side. Bridegrooms also wear this on their wedding day. Women need to wear a long net shawl over their shoulders on formal occasions. In rural areas, men and women cover their heads with towels in the early mornings and also when carrying baskets and other objects on their heads.

Leather or velvet slippers with thongs are usually worn, although nowadays sandals and shoes are particularly popular with fashionable singers and actresses. (Shoes are actually called 'ladyshoes', probably a corruption of 'ladies' shoes'.) Men used to wear shoes and socks up to the 1960s but the dire lack of consumer goods since then

has meant they now wear utilitarian rubber slippers daily and velvet slippers for better occasions.

Each of the ethnic groups has its own colourful dress for the men and women. Usually they wear trousers or leggings as they live in the hills and mountains where the climate can be very cold at times. Thick cotton or wool materials are used and black is usually the dominant colour.

The major disadvantage with Myanmar traditional dress is that the sarong can soon come loose and has to be retied after any vigorous movement. A number of visitors have reported getting a shock to see women and men retying their sarongs in public. Women will usually go to any available corner or face a wall to retie their sarong. It does tend to look like the beginning of a strip tease!

In countries neighbouring Myanmar, the sarong has come to have some class associations; only servants, maids and the lower income classes continue to wear them. This is not the case in Myanmar. The women will probably never totally give up wearing the *longyi*, although, with the inevitable onslaught of Western ways, it may be that more fashionable designs and tailored sarongs will become popular, after the fashion of the Western-style skirts. Indeed, for many years now, actresses and singers have worn new styles invented by dressmakers. If the majority of women have not followed their lead it is mostly because of the cost, not a lack of desire to be fashionable. Singers and actresses set the style by wearing stockings, jeans, boots and clothes resembling Western dress on stage.

Many young girls nowadays do not own a proper traditional blouse and merely wear a T-shirt or Western-style blouse over their sarong. A visiting friend once described it as a 'half-dressed look'. One of the reasons for preferring T-shirts to traditional tops is that each blouse has to be tailor-made and it is far less costly and troublesome to wear a T-shirt. Also good materials are generally very expensive as they can only be obtained on the black market. For the average clerical worker, a yard of lace material for a blouse would be a month or two's wages.

Many young men own blue denim jeans which they wear when travelling. Men who wear trousers are somehow less frowned upon than women who wear shorts, skirts or dresses. Myanmar women themselves prefer wearing trousers to dresses as they are conservative about exposing their legs. (This could be a reason why most Myanmar women are generally not so much into sports.) Even expatriate Myanmar women will continue to wear their traditional clothes as far as the climate will allow or at least in the house though they may be living in the developed countries.

If you wish to wear Myanmar clothes, there are good tailors in the cities which your friends can recommend. The cost is much less than in the more developed countries in the region. The sarong can be sewed like a skirt or a wraparound and there are many new designs for the top. Western-style clothing can also be custom tailored.

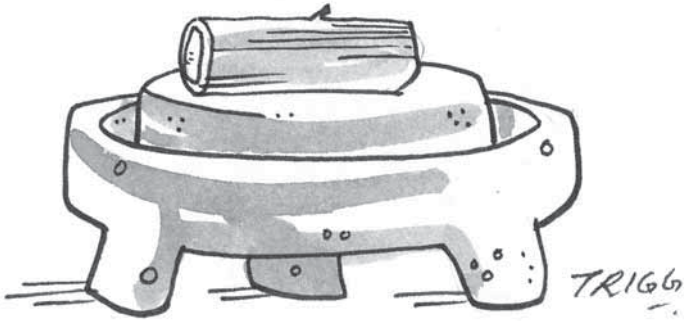
Make-up

Myanmar women are often photographed for the *thanaka* they wear on their cheeks. *Thanaka* is obtained from the bark of a small tree by grinding it on a circular grinding stone with a few drops of water. The pale yellow paste that is formed is used by females of all ages on the face, arms and legs. The *thanaka* liquid, when it dries on the skin, helps to control oiliness and has a light fragrance which Myanmar women like very much.

Rice transplanting or harvesting workers will wear thick *thanaka* on their cheeks and nose to prevent sunburn. In the cold season, a cream would be applied as a base to prevent the skin from drying out.

Modern girls wear eye make-up, rouge and foundation, but *thanaka* is traditional and may still be worn mixed with cosmetics. Even expatriates as far away as London and Australia have the traditional *thanaka kyauk pyin* (grinding stone). This is so heavy that one wonders how it could have been transported overseas—probably by boat through the kind services of a courier friend (see Chapter Seven).

Older women do not go to extremes to look young as age is not something Myanmar women try to hide. Probably the one



vanity that older Myanmar women will indulge in is to dye their hair black. This may be because the traditional hairstyle for women (hair pulled back and coiled in a bun) is a very severe style and black hair makes it look much better. Short hair is only for children, those who have been very ill or ladies of Chinese descent who like to perm their hair no matter what their age. Old age is inevitable according to Buddhist teaching, so, in Myanmar eyes, old women wearing make-up are considered undignified or not 'decent-looking'.

A traditional shampoo, obtained from the bark of a vine called *tayaw* and mixed with some seeds of *kin pun* (a type of acacia) pods, is also commonly used. This gooey substance keeps the hair smooth and the scalp cool. Coconut oil may be used daily or weekly to keep the scalp oiled and prevent dry hair.

SOCIALISING IN MYANMAR

CHAPTER 4

'It was a place of extremes: of hope and delinquency, of sobriety and drunkenness, of grand future designs and denial of the present.'
—Rory Maclean, *Under the Dragon: Travels in a Betrayed Land*

GETTING TO KNOW THE MYANMAR PEOPLE

At the present time it is quite difficult for any foreigner to get to know the Myanmar freely. A visitor's capacity to socialise with Myanmar friends in their own homes among family and relatives is circumscribed in strict ways by the government. Officials are placed under even greater restrictions, their relationships with foreigners being limited to official duties. Indeed, all meetings with foreigners require reports to be submitted. Staying as a guest in someone's home for any period of time has to be reported to local authorities, even if the visitor is another Myanmar. So it is not common for the Myanmar to invite foreigners to their homes for overnight stays or even dinner.

Of course there are always ways and means of getting to know the people, even if it's only through chatting to a trishaw man, taxi driver, street vendor or anyone else you may encounter on your travels.

The younger generation, perhaps as a reaction to having grown up in a closed environment, are generally eager to make acquaintances with foreigners. They usually show a genuine desire to help foreigners appreciate the beautiful aspects of their country, although the little gifts they may receive in the process are, of course, an added bonus.

Any chance of being able to practise their English is also appreciated, as most young people learn the language in conversation classes, known as 'English-speaking classes'.

If, however, the person you speak to appears nervous, unwilling to speak to you or disinterested, it is best not to press further but simply try someone else.

Do be careful to avoid discussions about political issues, which can prove to be dangerous and disastrous for you and for the locals. Even if the people you speak to complain about politics or the economy, it is safer to be discreet than valorous. Also avoid religious discussions and criticism as the Myanmar can get very worked up over what they believe to be religious insults.

GREETINGS

Among the Myanmar it is not usual to greet each other with 'good morning', 'good day', 'goodnight' or 'goodbye'. Greetings would be rhetorical questions like, 'Where are you going?', 'Have you eaten your meal?' and 'Are you well?'

An answer (or an exact one, at least) is not needed and a smile in return would be sufficient. Between two women the conversation may be as inane as saying to each other, "You've put on/lost weight" or "You look exactly the same," especially if they have not seen each other for some time.

In recent times the phrase *mingala-ba*, meaning something like 'auspiciousness be upon you', has been used in schools by pupils greeting their teachers every morning. It is not used very widely elsewhere, although most Myanmar people would be charmed to find a foreign visitor greeting them with this phrase. Probably a simple 'hello' is sure to be understood by everyone as even Myanmar use it when answering phones.

How Do You Do?
A humorous story about a famous dancer and his troupe visiting the USA in the 1950s tells about the dancer being greeted with a "How do you do?", whereupon he raised his arms in a typical dancing pose and replied, "I do like this!"

Thank You and Sorry

It is not usual for the Myanmar people to say 'thank you' for every service and 'sorry' for every mistake. To show that one is sorry, it is more acceptable to say 'forgive me' or admit that a mistake was inadvertent. To express thanks, actions like giving gifts or performing some sort of service are appreciated more than words. English-educated people would, however, be likely to say 'thank you' and 'sorry' in English and if you use these terms you will be understood by everyone.

Nevertheless, the following are the Myanmar terms to express thanks or apology are:

kyay zu tin bar de	thank you
kyay zu bar be	thank you
seik ma shi bar ne	literally, please do not get angry
khwint hlut par	literally, do forgive me

Ways to Address Others

The Myanmar have specific ways of addressing each other depending on the parties involved. Every social relationship, be it that of a teacher and student, a monk and his disciple, a friend and a friend, a parent and a child or a superior and a subordinate, involves different forms of address.

You and I, Uncle and Auntie

Certain words are used in place of the pronouns 'you' and 'I'. For instance, instead of simply saying the pronoun 'you', they use terms that are the equivalent of 'my master', 'thou' or the person's name. 'I' could be 'your humble servant', 'daughter/son' (if talking to an older person), or just your own name. Females, especially, would use their own name in every sentence (i.e. they very often use the third person in speech). For example, a girl named Hla could say, "Hla is going out now." The Myanmar words for 'you' and 'I' are actually only used in a more formal setting.

Among convent-bred, English-educated women it is quite common to intersperse sentences in Myanmar with the English terms, 'you' and 'I'. However, this type of conversation is usually considered pretentious and is the object of derision among conservative Myanmar.

Ways of Addressing Your Friends

Kinship titles are used among close friends, even though they are not actually related to each other. Such titles are:

- Elder brother — *Ah ko*
- Elder sister — *Ma ma*
- Eldest brother — *Ahko gyi* ('*gyi*' is pronounced 'ji')
- Eldest sister — *Ahma gyi*
- Younger brother — *Nyi*
- Younger sister — *Nyi ma*
- Uncle — *U*
- Aunt — *Daw*

The use of the English words 'uncle' and 'auntie' as honorifics for those of a certain age is quite common, especially when addressing friends of one's parents. However, in the rural areas it would be more proper to address elders of a village as *U* rather than the English 'uncle'. (The words '*U*' and '*Daw*' also mean uncle and aunt respectively.)

To avoid offence do not address mature women or professional women as 'auntie' which can be misconstrued as implying great age. It is better to use the formal *Daw* in such cases. Professional women are usually addressed as *Ma Ma* (elder sister), and also as 'auntie' by their colleagues and juniors in the work place.

Ways to Address Your Counterpart

Bearing in mind this complexity of names and honorifics, visitors may worry about how to address their Myanmar colleagues. Let's look at a concrete example which shows how forms of address vary.

U Hla Shein, the General Manager of a company, could be addressed as:

- U Hla Shein by business colleagues;
- Ko Hla Shein by colleagues of a long-standing nature;
- Ko Hla by his wife;
- Maung Hla Shein by his teachers, monks of his hometown monastery and elders.

As a foreigner, however, you should address him as U Hla Shein on the first meeting that is until and unless he gives you a specific way to address him.

He may allow you to call him either Hla or Shein to make things easier for you, but he will never be addressed in this manner by his Myanmar friends. If you add the honorific *U* (or *Daw* for a woman) to the name you will generally find that regard for you is very high indeed.

Do not try to show friendliness or closeness by using a name without a prefix as this can easily be misunderstood as an insult or show of disrespect. You should use the formal prefix until your counterpart asks you to drop it.

Ways You May be Addressed

Conversely, it is extremely hard for Myanmar men and women to drop honorific forms of address to those whom they perceive as being superior in education, age, rank or status. Dr John Smith, for example, will be called Dr John by his patients and students, but never just John, even if he should insist on it. The use of the Christian name alone sounds rude and disrespectful to the Myanmar ear, and even more so is the use of the surname only. So your Myanmar counterpart may keep on calling you Dr, Mr, Miss or Mrs, much to your annoyance, and you may make the mistake of thinking you have been unable to reach a level of informality. The real reason for addressing you this way is to show respect and deference.

Proper Respect, Please!

For father-in-law and mother-in-law there is only one term *yow-kha-ma*. However the syllable *ma* is also used to indicate the female gender so that sometimes people say *yow-kha-htee* to mean the father-in-law, as the word for male gender is *a-htee*, in jest. The term *yow-kha-htee* is actually just a made-up word and you probably won't find it in any dictionary.

A LIFETIME OF CEREMONY

If you stay in Myanmar for a longish while, you will need to be familiar with Myanmar ceremonies. Myanmar lifecycle ceremonies, or rites of passage, are classified into *tha yei* and *na yei*. *Tha yei* stands for the happy occasions and *na yei* for the sad ones. The former includes births, marriages, birthdays and engagements, while the latter includes sickness and death.

Myanmar people love ceremony and, if they can possibly afford it, they try to have elaborate celebrations to which they can invite all their family, friends and neighbours. Even if they cannot afford this they are often willing to get into substantial debt in order to celebrate in style. A great amount of time, money and energy is expended planning ceremonies and celebrations in Myanmar, but helpers are always plentiful on

these occasions and relatives are expected to do their family duty by getting involved in whatever way they can.

CHILDHOOD

> Children are the chimes of a home.
>
> —Myanmar saying

Myanmar children are very much loved, indulged and spoilt. You may find that your domestic staff tends to do this with your own children. However, you should never express admiration of children because the Myanmar believe that evil spirits will hear and harm them. Never exclaim how fat a baby or child is, or how chubby or heavy.

One of the most important occasions in a boy's life is the *shinbyu* ceremony when, for a short period, he becomes a novice in the local Buddhist monastery. This can be from a few days to a week or more. Parents and grandparents are very proud and happy on this occasion as they receive great merit from the novitiation. At this time they also have a chance to offer robes, food and money to the monks, as well as a feast for guests. In rural areas, many parents go into debt in order to provide a grand feast.

For girls, ear-piercing ceremonies used to be a ritual occasion but they are not widely celebrated now. However, girls can also have a novitiation ceremony if they become nuns in a local nunnery.

A boy's entrance into the monastery is always cause for a celebration. It is a highly anticipated event for families.

Feasts for monks are given for both the *shinbyu* and when girls enter a nunnery. For the ear-piercing ceremony, a feast for monks and guests is also the norm. If you are invited, there is no need to bring a gift. Your presence at the ceremony or the feast is all that is required.

These ceremonies are very colourful as the participants will be dressed in traditional costume. Wealthier hosts may even hire professional dancers and entertainers. It is usual to take photographs on these occasions and many of the guests will gladly pose if you wish to do so.

BIRTHS

From the time a couple get married they are continually asked when the first child will be arriving! It is considered very odd for a couple not to want to have any children and all parents are eager to become grandparents. Barren couples are always pitied. In rural areas, this attitude may stem from the fact that people do not mind having many children because of the high infant mortality rates, the use of the children's labour on the farms and for security in old age.

As soon as the wife is expecting, there is excitement in the family. Preparations are made but there are many superstitions surrounding childbirth, partly due to high mortality rates for mother and child. For instance, as disposable diapers have not yet reached Myanmar, expectant mothers will prepare a stock of cloth that can be used. These are sewn but not completely finished off. It's the same with baby clothes, where hems are left unfinished. The superstition is that to be over-prepared will bring misfortune on the new baby. If clothes are bought they are not kept with the mother-to-be but with some other person who will bring them over only after the baby is born.

Pregnant women also have to be careful about what they eat. There are taboos about eating too much chilli, bananas and glutinous rice and about not going to funerals or visiting cemeteries. They will often not be invited to weddings and, even if invited, may not wish to go. Alternatively, the wedding

Man on raft, woman in childbirth, very perilous.
—Myanmar saying

couple will be asked if they mind a pregnant guest attending. However, educated Myanmar do not pay too much attention to these superstitions.

Gifts

Once a friend or colleague has a new baby it is usual to give a small gift, such as pieces of cloth, baby clothes, feeding bottles, talcum powder and so on. Close friends try to visit the mother and baby in the hospital. Friends visiting from afar will not only bring presents but will often be given them in return when they leave.

If you are going to be away when your friend or colleague gives birth and you wish to give a present anyway, it is a good idea to give the gift to a close friend of the mother-to-be who will give it on your behalf when the time comes. Do not give it earlier because many women are still quite superstitious when it comes to childbirth and would rather not take chances.

Feasts

It is usual for the baby's arrival to be celebrated with a naming day feast or '100-days-old' feast. Monks are invited

over for an early morning or mid-morning meal, prayers will be chanted and then the guests will be fed. (See Chapter Six for more on feasts.)

ENGAGEMENTS

In Myanmar, there are arranged marriages as well as marriages that are not. There is no need for a dowry.

Sometimes a couple's parents may prefer for them to be engaged first. Distinguished couples who have had long and happy marriages are the preferred guests at an engagement party. Widows, widowers and divorcees are usually never invited to be guests of honour.

Both families will usually have at least one couple as guests of honour and the male guest of honour has to make a speech about the qualities and qualifications of the prospective bridegroom. Then, on behalf of the latter's parents; he formally requests the hand of the bride-to-be.

These engagement parties are small affairs, with only close friends and relatives invited. If a more formal affair is planned, it will often be held in a small suite at a hotel, with as many as 50 guests. Engagement rings may be exchanged depending on the couple's preference. Light refreshments will be provided.

Gifts are not necessary on these occasions.

Among Christians, engagements are also celebrated with an exchange of rings.

WEDDINGS

Weddings among the Myanmar do not have religious significance and couples are not married by monks. According to Myanmar Buddhist law, if a man and woman are recognised as a couple by seven houses to the right and seven houses to the left of their home, then they can become husband and wife. They can be married in a ceremony conducted by any distinguished couple, including government ministers, chief justices, barristers, doctors and professors. Again, however, the couple performing the ceremony should be one with a long and happy marriage, preferably blessed with many children. If this is not

A typical wedding photo. As large and formal weddings are signs of status, friends and family are usually dressed to the nines.

possible or convenient, the bride and groom will simply visit a registry of marriages and sign a marriage certificate. Christian marriages are solemnised in churches, as in other Christian communities all over the world.

Large formal weddings are held at hotels and guests can number 500 or more. The Myanmar concept of 'face' (see Chapter Three) requires that no one who ought to be invited is left out.

Coffee and tea are served at wedding parties, as well as tea-time food like sandwiches, cakes, meat puffs and ice-cream. This type of fare has been served for years, since the time the hotels were run by foreign firms. The menu has only seen a change in quality as ingredients were exchanged for low-quality ones, the finer foods and goods being sold on the black market by those who pilfered them. It seems that at weddings no one has ever bothered to serve anything else. At The Strand Hotel you may be served buttered rice and chicken curry, but many still seem to prefer tea, cakes, ice cream and sandwiches for wedding receptions. There is usually a live band, which is often very loud and makes it hard to carry on a conversation with the friends seated at the same table. Sometimes a wedding dinner may be served

later the same evening or another to family, relatives and close friends at a restaurant, usually a Chinese one, and this is a more informal and intimate gathering.

Being able to have a wedding at a big hotel is a status symbol, the ability to invite guests in hundreds being proof of one's wealth and hospitality.

You are likely to witness at least one of these weddings in a hotel and can have a chance to photograph the brightly coloured traditional clothes worn by the bride and groom. The guests will also be wearing their best clothes and the women their loveliest jewellery. All of it is real as costume jewellery is hardly ever worn on these occasions. This is the time to show off one's wealth and acquisitions.

Wedding Dates

Weddings are not celebrated during the months of Buddhist Lent, which roughly fall between June and September.

Astrological calculations are made for all important matters in Myanmar life, from choosing business partners to the most auspicious hour and dates for laying the foundations of important buildings. Not surprisingly, then, people will often consult astrologers or psychics about all aspects of married life. This includes the choice of a partner, the most auspicious day for the wedding and what to do to make the marriage a long and successful one.

Choosing names for children, companies and brands is also astrologically calculated, the logic here being that it's better to be safe than sorry. Of course if everything were to depend on astrology telling us our lucky numbers, we would all be millionaires by now!

Gifts

For weddings, cash is given only when it appears that the bridal couple is in somewhat needy circumstances, for example when both bride and groom are still students in college or when they do not yet have established jobs. Cash gifts in multiples of one hundred were commonly given

since a hundred is a symbol of long life and, by inference, a long marriage. Nowadays, inflation is so high that gifts would be in US dollars or hundred thousands. One would give cash gifts to one's domestic staff, to employees or junior clerical officers. Otherwise, household items like bed linen, towels, crockery, kitchenware, tableware and appliances are acceptable gifts. Pieces of cloth for the bride to make clothes are sometimes given. Photo albums are also useful presents since many photos are taken and viewed by all guests and visitors later on. Videos are also shot and the total cost of photography and videos is usually equivalent to a small fortune but it's rationalised as being a once-in-a-lifetime indulgence.

Superstitions exist about giving knives and scissors as gifts, so it's better not to do so. Gifts in black colour should also be avoided.

Decorative items should be considered only where utilitarian gifts have been exhausted. In Myanmar, it is functional items which are needed more. Extremely luxurious gifts may not be meaningful if their use is somewhat limited. For example, a fine handmade doll may not be significantly appreciated because a lot of things in Myanmar are handmade anyway.

In offices, funds are pooled to buy a more sumptuous gift for the wedding couple. The names of all the givers are signed on the card. This method is easy on the pockets of office workers who do not earn much. Sometimes a sliding scale is arranged whereby the head of the office contributes the most and the juniors the least. If you wish to participate in such a collection you should make your wishes clear, otherwise it will be assumed that you will be giving a present individually.

SICKNESS

When someone is seriously ill and in hospital the fact is made known to those closest to that person. If he or she is very ill, it is important to make a call at the hospital if you can. *Na yei* (sad ceremonies) are given more weight than happy events as far as attendance and effort is concerned.

Unlike Westerners, who would prefer not to have callers during a hospitalisation, the Myanmar will arrive in their dozens, taking turns to go up and see the patient. Even colleagues, superiors and juniors, will make an effort to visit.

In the provinces, cartloads of relatives from a village will camp in the hospital compound, cook over a log fire and take care of the patient! Such camps may stay in situ for quite some time, depending on the illness of the patient.

Hospitalisation for locals is a difficult and costly business. As nurses are expensive and in great demand, it often requires a good deal of organisation as to who will be the patient's attendant for the day and for the night. In addition to that, food must be provided by the family as hospitals have not done so since the late 1960s.

In Myanmar, old people are treated with respect and loving care if younger people can possibly give it. Filial duty is emphasised and is believed to bring many blessings. However, many old people are afraid of hospitals and do not wish to be hospitalised if they can help it. Hospitals are perceived as places where one is inevitably sent to die. There may have been some truth in this in the old days when people only went to hospitals if it was nearly too late and deaths soon after hospitalisation were frequent.

Gifts

Flowers do not have significance as gifts and it is not advisable to give flowers to sick friends. Food items such as fruits, biscuits, cordials or various powdered drinks, like Ovaltine and Milo, are more useful and meaningful.

DEATH

Death is classified with *na yei*. To the Myanmar, death is just one stage in the cycle of life and for this reason there are no official mourning periods specified by religion. Families and friends will grieve, but they should not do so for long periods of time.

When a person dies at home the body is bathed and clothed in that person's favourite or newest clothing. It is then laid out on a bed decorated with lace, netting and flowers.

Afterwards, the bed is often donated to the local monastery as a gesture of goodwill that will help the dead along the cycle of life. On the day of death, a monk is invited over for a meal and he will offer prayers for the dead.

If a person dies in hospital or away from home, the body is not allowed back into the perimeters of the village or street where the deceased lived. It will be kept at the morgue, although in rural areas it is not uncommon to see a coffin with its corpse laid out for burial on the outskirts of the village.

As soon as a death occurs, it is made known to all family and friends who must make every effort to help the bereaved family in any way they can. This includes cooking, caring for the children and entertaining callers throughout the day (and frequently the night) until the seventh day. On this last day (which is two or four days after the burial), a feast is again given to monks and offerings are made. Through this act of merit (called *dana*) the deceased's spirit may go peacefully on to its next existence.

At a Wake

As it is believed that the spirit of the dead remains near the body or home for up to a week after death, a wake is held for most of this period. However, in cases where death occurs just before the Myanmar New Year the funeral will be held as quickly as possible so that it will not be carried over into the new year and bring bad luck.

When a person dies there will usually be a large canvas tent-like structure in front of the house. The body of the deceased may lie there or at the mortuary, but callers will still visit the family. During the wake the house doors are left open and friends and relatives must keep vigil in turn during the nights. There will be endless pots of tea and card games to keep them awake.

When you visit during the day, small snacks are served while you pay your respects and talk to the deceased's family. There is no need to talk much. It is your presence that is appreciated. There is also no need to say goodbye. You can just quietly leave and ask any other relative around to tell the bereaved that you are going.

Funerals

Funerals usually take place on the third or fifth day after death. Burial is the norm in Myanmar, although in Yangon cremation is more common. The ceremony usually includes the recitation of prayers by visiting monks and an official notice read by the deceased's employers, releasing the dead from his or her duties.

Funerals require attendance and you may be surprised at the number of working hours lost in attending them. For close kin especially, attendance is so important that usually everything is dropped as soon as the news is received.

One may be forgiven for not attending a wedding but to fail in showing your face at a funeral means that you have no regard for the deceased and their family. If you are informed of the death of a friend or acquaintance, a telegram, letter or card must be sent if you cannot go personally. The fact that you are on the list of those to be informed means you are being given a chance not to lose face by attending the funeral or visiting the home of the deceased. Many are seriously offended if they did not know of the death of someone in time to attend the funeral or to show their respect in other ways.

When bitter quarrels arise between friends and relatives, they may curse one another with the oath, "Don't come to my funeral when I die!" Only the deepest and most unforgiving hatred brings out this exclamation, which shows how much the Myanmar value attendance at funerals.

When a colleague passes away, all office staff will attend the funeral. They help in many ways, either by cash contributions, donating paper fans with prayers printed on them, small prayer books and pamphlets or providing buses to carry mourners. Office work may slow down or even stop as these social obligations are very important to office staff. Only the most serious circumstances are considered excuse enough for not showing one's face at a funeral.

A famous poet was reportedly buried three times—once when she died, then when the cemetery she was buried in was cleared and her grave was moved to another cemetery and then again when that cemetery itself was moved!

In the 1990s, the government moved the cemeteries and crematoria in the city of Yangon far outside the city in an attempt

to clear out large areas of prime land and also to move the squatters who lived among the graveyards; these are outcastes who make a living by selling coffins and helping with funerals. Thus, many people now do not attempt to go to funerals as much as before as they are unable to go so far and it is more excusable if friends don't turn up. However, they should still make an effort to call at the home of the bereaved.

Na Yei Assistance Associations

Since about the year 2000, these associations have been formed in Mandalay and Yangon. There are people so poor that they cannot afford to organise the funerals of their loved ones and these associations step in to help, free of charge and regardless of religion or race. In Mandalay, the association is known as the Brahmaso Association and in Yangon the Na Yei Assistance Association was formed by the well-known movie, TV and video star, actor U Kyaw Thu, who has won a number of Myanmar Academy awards, his wife, whose nickname is Ms Golden Owl, and their friends. The voluntary association helps with taking the body from the house of the bereaved to the cemetery for cremation or burial; often the hearse is driven by U Kyaw Thu himself.

As the poorer people live far away on the outskirts of the city, the empty coffin might sometimes have to be carried over rice fields or ditches by the association's volunteer members. Superstitious villagers would sometimes object to the empty coffin or the body in the coffin being carried past their homes. The association has become so well known that now even those who are reasonably well off have started to use the association's services which are well organised and remove much of the hassle of funeral arrangements. Some of the difficulties faced are due to the cemeteries having been moved far outside Yangon during the mid-1990s, the lack of good transportation, low car ownership, low incomes and the high price of petrol. In the past five years, the association has reportedly organised up to 40,000 free funerals, and every day handles up to several dozen. The associations offer to the bereaved a strong helping hand and real compassion.

What to Do and Wear

Your presence at the home of the deceased will be very much appreciated in itself.Gifts of money are valued if the family are in a lower income bracket. One may give flowers, but they do not really have much significance in Myanmar. When you cannot attend, a card, telegram or letter of condolence will be sufficient. You can have it written in Myanmar language by one of your friends or staff.

Do not wear bright colours. Wear navy, black, gray, brown or something sober, even though the Myanmar people do not have an official mourning colour. Shorts and short skirts should, of course, be avoided.

Do not greet the bereaved family with the Myanmar greeting *mingala-ba* which means 'auspiciousness to you'. Death is not an auspicious occasion.

CASUAL VISITS

Making casual visits among friends is very common for the Myanmar, who will drop by when they are in the neighbourhood and have the time. It is not usual to make appointments for visiting homes of close friends. Appointments imply self-importance, something that any modest Myanmar individual abhors. Phoning is possible but telephone calls in Yangon require great patience. As the distance from one place to another is not very great anyway, it is usual to go on impulse.

Even if your friends happen to be in the middle of entertaining others, you will usually be graciously invited to join in. Whether you accept or not is up to you.

A pleasant and happy home attracts visitors.
—Myanmar saying

Being the Perfect Guest

The perfect guest needs to know when to arrive and when to leave when invited to homes for breakfast, lunch or dinner. You may be forgiven for arriving late but a continual habit of it may cause your host to dub you 'the late Mr/Ms …', a common name for late (unpunctual) superiors to be called behind their backs.

Leaving too late is found annoying also because it is likely to throw your host off schedule the next day. Do remember that Myanmar generally sleep early and get up early. Thus, even though you may have a lot of time to kill, it is good to leave your host's home by about 10 pm or 10:30 pm. Leaving after midnight will result in only a few hours of sleep for your hosts.

Indeed, there is a saying that 'the late guest causes the host sleeplessness'.

THE OVERNIGHT GUEST

Due to government restrictions on locals mixing with foreigners, it appears unlikely that you will spend a few nights in your host's home. Your host would have to go to the trouble of reporting your presence to local authorities. So, though you may wish to sample how the Myanmar live, it is perhaps better not to stay overnight.

However, if you do manage it, here are some do's and don'ts:

- Don't wear outdoor shoes in the house. Even slippers should be taken off when you enter the altar room or bedrooms.

- Do offer to help with the chores if your hostess has to do everything herself; even if there are servants to do this, the offer will be appreciated.
- Do try to entertain the children. Take along the kids when you go out and give them little treats: children are nearly always hungry or thirsty. You will find that once they get over their initial shyness they will follow you around everywhere and you might find it hard to shake them off.
- Don't expect to be entertained during the day. The likelihood is that your host works hard and is busy. Either please yourself or fit in and help out with your host's daily jobs.
- Do let your host know in advance whether you have specific things you'd like to do or whether you expect them to take you to certain places.
- Don't stay out all day without letting them know what time to expect you back and whether they need to include you in their meal plans. It is usually taken for granted that you will be eating with the family and they may be offended if you keep changing your plans or don't make the effort to sample their hospitality.

The Host's Duties

Your hosts may tend to pamper you. This is the way they try to make you feel at home and show that your welfare is important to them. Sometimes they will go out of their way to make your stay pleasant and you may not have an inkling of it. For example, they may call on close friends to pull a few strings here and there to make things easy for you, and they may spend time and money arranging little luxuries, which a Westerner may simply take for granted.

You may at times find their questions intrusive but this is because, unlike Western people, the Myanmar are on the whole an extrovert race. They do not feel much need for privacy and may not realise that you do. In fact, there's no specific word for privacy in the Myanmar language.

When a guest is staying in one's house, the host's duties include not merely providing a place to stay or sleep, but

also giving information on good buys and where they can be found, providing meals and accompanying the guest to places of interest.

Beds

Beds are made without the top sheet, although hotel beds would be made in the Western way. One sleeps on the sheet and, when it's chilly, a light blanket may be provided.

Feet must be washed before getting into the bed and wiped with special cloths provided. Do not wash your feet in the sink but use the stored water usually provided in the jars by the sink. You'll also find a small bowl that is used for pouring. If you wear socks or slippers there is no need to wash your feet.

Sleeping in the buff is not advisable as homes lack privacy. There are usually no doors, just curtains which keep the air circulating but afford no seclusion.

Laundry

You should take care of your own laundry, especially underwear, even if your host has servants. All laundry

is usually done by hand. Having to wash other people's undergarments may be offensive.

Do not wash panties and socks in the sink but use a small plastic bucket or basin, usually found in the bathroom. Don't be afraid to ask your host or somebody the same gender as yourself.

Try not to hang your underwear out on the front porch but dry it in the bathroom or back room, the place where the womenfolk hang their *longyi* to dry. Also do not dry them at head level or where the towels are hung because the Myanmar consider the lower and upper parts of the body very differently. The upper is held sacred, especially the head and hair, while the lower is very inferior and considered unclean. (Refer to 'Body Language' on page 184.) Women's *longyi* are considered especially unclean.

The Importance Of The Head

The head of a person is considered sacred and so Myanmar don't touch other people's heads and don't like to have their heads patted or touched in other ways either. Also one shouldn't pass objects over the heads of older persons who may be sitting nearby. Neither should one cross over the head/upper part of a person who is sleeping on a mat at floor level nor step over pillows and cushions used for sleeping. When passing in front of older persons, a slight bow is required and younger persons are not supposed to tower over those older when communicating with them.

Feet being the lowliest part of the body to the Myanmar, one would never point at something with a foot nor move objects with the feet by kicking them, unless absolutely necessary. Nor should one step over books and printed material, more so religious books.

Also as mentioned before, Myanmar sleep with their heads toward the shrine room and the Buddha image there, and never with their feet pointing that way. Myanmar have the terms *gaung yinn* and *chay yinn* to indicate which way the head and feet should be placed respectively, and also

to indicate direction, for example one might refer to a neighbour's house as the one which is on the *gaung yinn* side. Myanmar would never sleep on a bed with their head on the *chay yinn* side or the foot of the bed.

By extension, shoes and other footwear also have a lowly status and while older persons may ask juniors to help them with putting on their sandals or shoes, juniors cannot do that with seniors.

Toilets and Baths

Western-style houses will have flush toilets as well as Asian-style squat toilets. There is usually a water basin or pipe near the toilet for washing yourself after you have finished. The Myanmar, like other Asians, tend to use a lot of water and toilets are often wet and slippery.

Mops are not used but local coconut frond stems are made into brooms and used for swishing out excess water on the floor.

In the villages, toilets are separate from the house and often some distance away. One needs a torch or candle for going to the toilet at night. Open pits are common and the only way to overcome the stench is to close your nose or to smoke perhaps. Be careful about valuable things in your pockets. Try not to carry them into the toilet in case they fall into the pit, never again to be retrieved! Be sure to wear flat slippers or shoes to avoid slipping. Shorts and skirts are best so that you can bend your knees to squat. Paper or water may not be available so it is best to carry wet wipes or your own roll of toilet paper when travelling through villages. Villages without toilets are said to be cleaner, since the villagers use a small trowel or scoop to make holes in the ground and then cover the waste with earth.

In some cases, it is often best to simply do your business behind the bushes; all you have to do is to cough whenever you hear someone coming so that your presence in the vicinity is known! Do look out for insects and leeches; you are not very likely to see snakes but you should still be careful. Take a stick along with you. Hopefully, you will never have to encounter one but you never know.

Bathrooms do not have hot water heaters, except in urban areas and then not every house will have one. Most take cold baths and only on cold days will water be boiled, usually for children and old folk.

Locals take baths at least twice a day, once in the morning before going out to work and once again when they come home in the evening. Because of the unpredictable supply of water it is usual to store it in barrels or tubs. Even where bathtubs are available they have to be used for storing water. Water is not scarce in Myanmar, except perhaps in the Dry Zone. It is because of poor and crowded housing and the lack of proper water management (you'll often see water being wasted from leaking pipes) that water is now scarce in the city. Long queues form in the summer at the water taps in each quarter of the city and fights will ensue over queue-jumping. At present, the shortage of electricity means that water has to be stored when it can be pumped and often means that people might have to get up in the middle of the night to do that if that is when the power supply is available.

Myanmar students studying in London once gave their landlady quite a shock when she discovered water flowing from the bathroom and all over the bedroom carpet!

Myanmar do not find showers cooling enough and they dislike soaking in bathtubs even if they have one. Most find the thought of soaking in one's own dirty water quite loathsome. They prefer to bathe by dipping a small bowl into a water jar and pouring it over their heads. Actually this is a wasteful way to bathe but the Myanmar never seem to have become accustomed to any other method.

Bathing nude is also relatively new for the Myanmar and is called 'Japanese bathing', perhaps because they discovered this way of bathing during the Japanese Occupation. More commonly, the Myanmar bathe at public wells and tanks. Men fold up their sarong into the waist like shorts, while women would wrap theirs over their breasts.

BEHAVIOUR AT RELIGIOUS SITES

In places like Bagan, you will find relics and antiques lying around all over the place, that is, if they have not already been destroyed by vandalism or stolen by locals and other visitors.

There is no adequate protection of these valuable antiques and the local sense of heritage is not so great as the need to get some money for the next meal. Try not to yield to the temptation to pick up a souvenir. You may be tempted by thoughts like: "If I don't take it, someone else will", "If I leave it, it will only be vandalised" or "At least it will be taken good care of in my collection".

Being taken on a round of all the pagodas may well daze you so much that you are not able to appreciate the treasures or the architectural splendour. Some sites are not very well preserved and museum pieces may seem insignificant because a lack of know-how means they are poorly displayed. However, do try to be positive and express admiration rather than complaint. Remember that Myanmar has been closed for so long people have had to survive by various means, including the destruction of their own art treasures.

Moreover, some objects and handicrafts on sale do not have high degrees of refinement as materials may have been poor to start with. Sometimes fakes purporting to be from Myanmar but actually made in neighbouring countries seem so much better!

When you are in the pagodas or monasteries remember that women should not attempt to talk or shake hands with monks as they are forbidden to touch the female sex. Monks may even turn their backs to women when they pass.

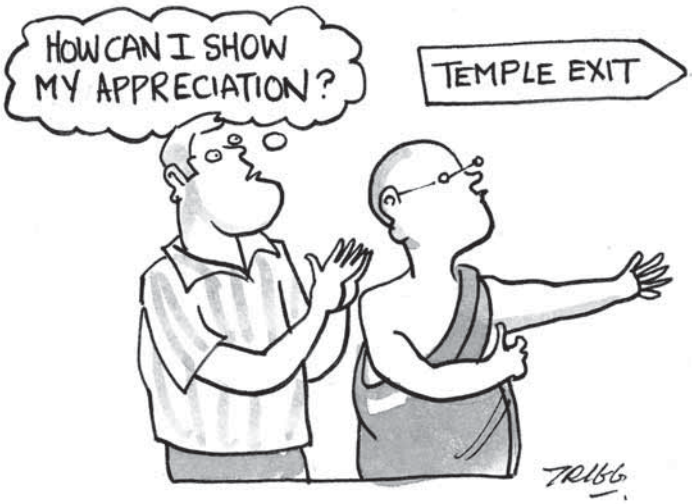
Donating money to them does not mean that you simply hand over the cash. It should be placed in an envelope and then handed to the monks' attendant (*kappiya*).

Religious objects inside shrines may be photographed and there are rarely restrictions on photography.

Avoid causing too much laughter and loud talk, although there is no strict rule about this.

EXPERIENCING ASTROLOGICAL PREDICTIONS

As a visitor there will always be certain experiences which are off-limits to you simply because you are a foreigner. You will be labelled a skeptic from the very beginning



(especially if you're Caucasian) and many things will not be told to you because of fear of ridicule. For that matter, many Westernised Myanmar also tend to reject the various superstitions that traditional Myanmar people hold.

If you are eager to experience an astrological or psychic prediction, you can always get your local friends to recommend a fortune-teller or take you to one. They may be happy to translate for you, although you will then find that a lot of things about your personal life will no longer be secret! It doesn't matter what's true or not true about the predictions but it does matter that many of these astrologers and palmists do not have private rooms for consultations. Everyone just sits around waiting for their turn and listens to everything! They may laugh if they hear something funny or exclaim rather ominously at other more frightening predictions. It's all a participatory process and you should be prepared to take it all in a sporting spirit.

Do not take everything too seriously; many of these fortune-tellers are experienced in human psychology more than astrology. They have an equal chance of being right or wrong about your life and your future and, if you're a visitor, the likelihood is that you'll not be back in Myanmar again for a long time to tell him where he went wrong!

SETTLING IN

CHAPTER 5

'[We] stood there for a while gazing about us. And I remember thinking to myself: never mind that it's a backwater, never mind that this hotel is so very shabby, that there are cobwebs on the ceiling and cockroaches in the bathroom. There is beauty here. And there is peace. We could be very happy here. And we were.'
—Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, *Five Years in a Forgotten Land: A Burmese Notebook*

Foreigners living in Myanmar are invariably uncomfortable at first. This is often due to a vast difference in standards of living between Myanmar and the places they came from. Yangon seems positively primitive with its uncertain electricity and water supply, rather few supermarkets and department stores, not such a wide variety of consumer products available, and almost no nightlife. One Western friend summarised her annoyance in a memorable line, "There's no ice in the hotel, no nightlife, just lots of pagodas!"

At least those who have previously spent time in Myanmar are happy to find nothing has changed when they return! Those who are already aware of the conditions are able to get adjusted more quickly. By the time they leave they can appreciate Myanmar for its positive qualities: the fresh air, unspoiled beaches, green trees—relatively rare qualities these days.

HOUSE FOR RENT

Brokers will help you find a house and put you in touch with potential landlords or landladies. There are large numbers of houses specifically built to be rented out to expatriates for foreign exchange, so there is a good choice available, especially in Yangon.

Getting the right broker is important. You should preferably contact them through friends so that you can draw from their experience and advice, should you need it. Common

problems to look out for include brokers failing to refund a deposit when a deal falls through; unreliable brokers who will show you all kinds of unsuitable accommodation in a desperate attempt to make a deal; and disagreements over the brokerage fee (although this is usually fixed at a month's rent).

Suburbs outside Yangon, towards the north, are good residential areas and have a concentration of accommodation. Houses are really a better choice than apartments as they normally have walls and gates which offer security and privacy. Flats are rather functional in design at present. The typical house for foreigners is either one- or two-storied and has about five or six rooms. The older houses are even bigger. Most houses will have large gardens with shady trees.

Unlike modern cities, where people prefer to stay close to their offices, in Yangon good houses are in residential districts outside the city limits. The centre of Yangon commands high rents for office space only and residential apartments tend to be old ones with poor water supply and old fittings.

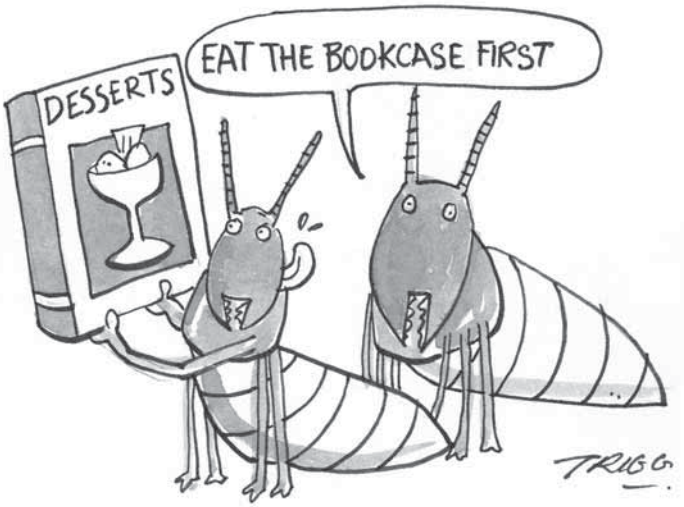
A building and construction boom in the mid-1990s led to many new apartments being built in Yangon especially; modern serviced apartments are also available. For buildings with up to seven stories, there are no lifts.

Termites and Other Pests

Termites, which Asians also call white ants, can reduce the contents of a cupboard to debris in a day or two. Termites tend to live in areas with reddish soil. They like dark, moist areas and the rains tend to bring more termites into the house.

Oddly, the Myanmar take it as a good omen if a white-ant mound appears overnight in their houses and shops (many of which have only earthen floors). The mound may even have gold leaf stuck on it as an offering, the way Buddha images are ornamented during worship.

Other common fauna that live in the house are lizards, spiders, geckos, ants (all sizes and colours) and cockroaches. Chemicals can be used but domestic staff should not be allowed to handle pesticides without supervision unless one



can be sure they know the dangers of using them. Other pests include rats, mice, scorpions and occasionally snakes if there is a large garden outside.

As a rule, young children should not be allowed to play in dark, cool corners of the house.

Flooding

Flooding occurs in some parts of Yangon during very heavy rains. This seems to be due to houses being built along areas which form natural drains for rainwater.

Flooding causes great damage to lovely teak parquet floors and, of course, to furniture and carpets. These should be moved upstairs, if you have an upper floor. Most houses are raised anyway, but if you are thinking of looking for a house on a hill to avoid flooding, think again—you may find that the water supply doesn't reach the second floor! Arranging for a pump to be installed can be troublesome and costly.

Power Supply

Three-phase wiring is recommended as your electrical load is expected to be heavy by Myanmar standards. Electricity is a 220 voltage system but is irregular and, as this can do irreparable damage to fridges, computers

and other appliances, it is worthwhile having a power regulator installed.

In fact, in Myanmar, appliances are better investments if they are manual rather than electric, not only because of the unpredictable power supply but because of domestics, who may be unskilled with such tools. In any case, you should get into the habit of never leaving electrical appliances with unsupervised servants. They may be honest and intelligent but they are sometimes illiterate or may have no idea of the danger of appliances. Unless you are sure of their capabilities, ban them from using electrical equipment, then at least you have only yourself to blame if expensive tools get broken or accidents happen.

You need to keep rechargeable electric lights, candles and matches for use during black-outs. These tend to be frequent and occur without warning. Stand-up fans may be needed as an alternative to air-cons. However, most houses will have ceiling fans and large verandahs that can help to keep rooms cool. Those who can afford it will have bought a generator to ease their electricity shortages.

DOMESTICS

How large a staff do you need? The average well-to-do Myanmar household has at least one maid and up to three in large houses or families. These maids do the cleaning, laundry (all washing is done manually) and cooking, as well as looking after any young children. A driver and very probably his family may live in servants' quarters as it is common for whole families to be hired in some domestic capacity by a wealthy household.

As you are likely to be living in a big house, you may at least need someone to do the cleaning. Many expatriates in Asia find domestic help inexpensive and convenient, so maids will often live-in and act as a cook and nanny as well. You will soon get used to such a lifestyle when you find yourself occupied with sightseeing trips, travelling, entertaining and other activities.

Nowadays full-time gardeners are seldom kept by those with big gardens because part-time workers are quite willing

to come for a day to trim the grass and the trees and hedges. Butlers are not really necessary any more and drivers can sometimes double as butlers on occasions when you are entertaining if you can train them.

Finding Good Staff for Your Household

There are networks of brokers who will bring prospective maids for you to consider or try out. These brokers make a considerable amount of money by going from one household to another and moving these girls about, earning brokerage each time. A common tale when they wish to remove a maid from your household is that one of her relatives, either father, mother or grandmother, has been taken ill and is about to die. Can she go back to the village as soon as possible?

The story may be true and you should remember the importance of visiting the sick and attending funerals in Myanmar culture. But sometimes the maids themselves are also looking for another job that will be more congenial and they are so simple that they believe the next household is sure to be better. Brokers will fuel this belief since the more times a maid is employed the more brokerage they earn.

Diplomatic corps and UN personnel tend to acquire staff from those who are leaving, a sort of hand-me-down system

which seems to work quite well. However, be aware that every household does things differently and what was good for previous employers may not be good enough for you. It should be made clear from the beginning the way you wish things to be done.

One expatriate lady who responded to a questionnaire for this book did mention a situation in which her Kayin maid pointedly refused to serve a guest of Indian origin. Problems with habits and customs will arise even with domestics who appear more Westernised than others.

The majority of domestic staff are Kayin or Indians who can speak English because of a Christian missionary education. They also tend to be knowledgeable of Western practices, habits and methods of cooking and housekeeping. Other missionary-educated ethnic groups are also Christians.

The Myanmar themselves do not tend to work as domestics because they generally find it beneath them to be employed in such jobs. Nevertheless, remuneration in foreign exchange can be an important factor in recruitment. Jobs as drivers and chauffeurs also appear to be more in line with their concept of status and prestige, and there seem to be many young Myanmar male graduates who are quite happy with such employment.

Sometimes very young 'green' girls are passed off as experienced staff because of the higher wage and resulting brokerage that can be earned. If you suspect that a young girl cannot possibly have as much experience in cooking and cleaning as your broker claims, you might bargain for a lower price or insist on a trial period.

Some young girls can be trained easily, especially if they have some education. They can become very faithful and attached to their employers and the children they look after. Indeed, you will find that for most of the locals, a job is rarely a job in its objective sense. It has all the ramifications of a social relationship. Some employers have been known to take a member of their staff back home with them when they left, that person having become so much a part of the family.

In choosing staff, personal cleanliness, good health and orderliness as well as a good character should be essentials.

Control

Domestic staff, however reliable, will still need a clear definition of what is expected of them. Rules must be established and control exerted. If you don't, you may find that, especially with household expenses, you are being presented with large inflated bills. It is advisable to make yourself knowledgeable about prices, weights and measures (Refer to page 115) in order to have a rough idea of whether or not you are being over-charged. Always ask local friends, who will be only too happy to help you with such information.

However, too much control is difficult as is too little. You don't want to be patronising and insulting as this creates a bad atmosphere in your house. You will have to measure the trustworthiness of each member of your staff on an individual basis.

In many cases, it is wise to overlook small or trivial shortcomings if you find that overall performance is adequate. Because of the language barrier alone, there will be many things which cannot be explained to you. Standards differ from place to place and Myanmar is one of those countries where most of the population does not have anything to do with foreigners, let alone attempt to understand their customs and ways. Adequate performance is more feasible than nagging your domestics to do things exactly as you would do them and have them walk out on you.

Once you have trained them it becomes a frightening prospect to think of doing the same again for a succession of servants. If the latter does occur, you should be warned that there is no such thing as the perfect domestic.

When Things Aren't Right

Scolding your staff is a sensitive issue. Always be sure to give a proper explanation when you want things to be done in a particular way. Keep your anger controlled and, above all, do not shout. Be sure that the staff understands that you are criticising the way things are done and not the person himself/herself. Shame is hard to bear in Myanmar culture, so never do your scolding in front of other staff. Take the person aside and do it quietly.

Remember that you do depend on them. Although you may have done everything 'back home' singlehandedly, here in Myanmar things are different: the house is large, the shopping and the cooking are different and there are also a lot of other things you would rather be doing in a new country than all that housework.

In many cases, the staff may not understand you properly. You may not have made an instruction very clear and, instead of asking again, they do what they think you meant. Most times they will not have the courage to ask you anything, let alone question your instructions. Moreover, when you scold them they may not be articulate enough to explain how a mistake came about, so you do need to be very patient.

Who's the Boss?

Egalitarian approaches to domestic management do not work. You may very much want to treat domestics as equals, only to find it working against you. The master and the mistress of the house are usually perceived as being at the highest level, and you cannot change that. They will not eat at the same table or sit on the same sofa. In a way, this makes things easy when it comes to difficult situations where you have to explain something you are not happy with and exert your authority. Giving too much freedom and then taking it away will leave your staff wondering where they stand. Be kind and understanding but clear and firm. You will be appreciated for it.

Even if you do not attempt to control much, it is a good idea to at least be visible. For example, get up early (you can always disappear again later) and give some instructions about what is to be cooked or your family's programme for the day. This gives broad guidelines to your domestics and it shows that you are the boss around the house.

Privacy

In your new home the setting may be very grand and who would complain about the luxury of being waited on hand and foot? Yet, when you have domestics it becomes very difficult to have privacy.

One solution is to give the servants a day off while you enjoy the company of your husband/wife and children. Alternatively, you could all take off somewhere where there will be no servants. Each of these measures safeguards against tempers becoming frayed because of constant domestic companionship.

Security

Valuables should be kept under lock and key or watched constantly. Stolen things are rarely recovered and you should remember that even everyday things are of value in Myanmar. It is sometimes a good policy to give away what you can before someone else does it for you. In other words, such things as outgrown or never-worn clothes, old and forgotten toys, books and stationery should be passed on to someone who will appreciate them. Even empty cans, containers and bottles can be sold. Possibly the person who is highest in the pecking order among your domestics (usually the longest-serving member) can be allowed to supervise a fair distribution of these.

A Word about Pets and Other Animals

The Myanmar do not generally keep pets, but if they do it is mostly cats or dogs which are kept in the grounds rather than in the house. Rather than pedigree dogs, which are not hardy and are expensive to feed and take care of, pariah dogs (mongrels) are more commonly kept as guard dogs. Some families may keep fish, rabbits, guinea pigs and birds but because of economic hardship it is not common to keep pets.

Nevertheless, the Myanmar try to be kind to animals because of their Buddhist ethic. You will find people feeding stray dogs and cats but they will not take them home. Large snails which wreak havoc in gardens will just be collected and dumped somewhere else, only to come back and start eating the leaves all over again. Similarly, rats and mice will not

At one time there was a superstition that rats would move away if one wrote on the kitchen wall, 'Rats for Sale'. Presumably the rodents had to be literate for the trick to work!

be poisoned but trapped and thrown out. Live fish found among those bought from the market during shopping will be released if possible.

These actions are the result of the Buddhist belief that animals must not be harmed and that merit is obtained by releasing animals from captivity. However, for the ceremony of releasing, someone has first to incur the evil of catching the animals! It is generally believed to be evil to keep living creatures in captivity.

If you have brought pets with you, you should make sure you have staff who will be able to take care of them. While the Myanmar generally treat animals kindly, they are not

Buddhists release birds to gain merit. However, it also means that someone has to capture the birds first for another to buy their freedom.

used to pampering them as pets. Some domestics will be offended at being asked to clear up after dogs and cats. This may not make for the most hygienic environment either, as your staff may also be handling food.

Local dogs and cats are nearly always strays and likely to be carriers of worms, fleas and ticks. It may be easy for your own pets to catch these infestations, not to mention your children.

It is a good idea to keep watch dogs in the garden at night. They should be kept away from the fence and the gate so that poisoned food cannot be fed to them by potential thieves. Female pets should be sterilised to prevent litters from strays, which you will find wandering all over the place. Local vets carry out surgical spaying but you may need a local friend or contact to avail yourself of these services.

SHOPPING

Going to the market with one of your domestics can be an educational experience but you may be daunted by the prospect of dealing with stall owners who don't speak English and are always on the lookout to rip-off unwary customers. Even Myanmar customers can be 'had' if they do not watch out, especially since some of them are reluctant to bargain and do not enjoy it at all.

Some markets, locally known as bazaars, are very wet and dirty. When you go there it is better to wear wooden clogs (boots or sports shoes with non-slip soles are good too) which are high and help to keep your feet clean. You could buy a pair of wooden clogs and keep them in the car. Carry a basket or two as plastic bags are still not widely available. Leaves and twine are still used to wrap meat and vegetables.

Most of the food tends to be watery. For example, prawns and shrimp are mixed with ice which later melts and fresh fish drips blood when chopped into pieces. Adulteration with water is also common as it increases weight. If you're not careful you can end up with a smelly car or boot. A practical measure is to keep a large metal tray in the car boot to put your shopping bags or baskets onto.

As a foreigner, you will be very conspicuous in the local market, especially if you are Caucasian. Even if you are Asian, the fact that you are wearing a dress or trousers will set you apart. For that reason alone you are easy prey. Thus, it is better to shop with friends or with staff for some time, until you can achieve a rapport with certain shop and stall owners whom you can regularly patronise. In the Myanmar language you will become known as *hpao thei* (a favourite customer). This will make shopping easier and undoubtedly save time over bargaining. Your stall owners will also get to know you by sight which is important as, to Asians, Caucasians all look the same (and probably vice versa). Most stall owners can speak enough English to conduct business.

However, because of the lack of availability and dubious quality of some goods in the markets, many foreigners get supplies from abroad. Foods like biscuits, cheese, mayonnaise, butter and drinks are either stocked up on trips abroad or may be bought at the US Embassy. Japanese expatriates are also said to fly in plane-loads of food items.

Money

Kyats are counted in thousands, ten thousands and hundred thousands. K 10,000 is one *thaung* (Myanmar); K 100,000 is called a lakh (also lac, derived from the Indian system) or *theinn* (Myanmar). One million (ten lakhs) kyats is one *thann* (Myanmar) and ten million (one hundred lakhs) is one crore (Indian) or one *gaday* (Myanmar). At the present time, due to high inflation, prices of land, houses, cars and jewellery are quoted in hundred thousands, i.e. lakhs, rather than in millions.

Any statistical tables from Myanmar sources concerning money and monetary values will be shown in lakhs (1 followed by five zeroes) and crores (1 followed by seven zeroes).

MEASURES

Myanmar counting and measuring is a system of its own and must be learned by anyone who wishes to shop successfully. Imperial measures rather than metric are used.

Weight

Weight is measured in *viss* (*peik-tha*) and ticals (*kyat thar*). A *viss* is about 3.3 lbs (1.6 kg.) There are 100 ticals in a *viss*. So, a tical is roughly half an ounce (14 g).

All shops in the bazaar selling provisions by weight would use this measure. However, rice is weighed differently, the basic measure being the condensed milk can (*bu*). Eight of these make up a *pyi* (usually measured in a small basket). Sixteen of these baskets make a *tinn* (usually put in a gunny or jute bag).

Length

- Length is still measured in *gaik* (pronounced "gike").
- One *gaik* is one yard (91 cm).
- One *taung* is half a yard (45.5 cm).
- One *htwa* is a quarter of a yard (22.75 cm).
- One *maik* is one eighth of a yard (11.37 cm).

Food Measures

- Fruits are measured by units. Ask for the price per apple, pomelo, mango and so on. Alternatively ask for the price of five or ten pieces.
- Dried raisins and other dried fruits are measured by weight. Ask for the price per *viss* or for 50 ticals.
- Small fruits, such as local sour plums, are bought by the condensed milk can. Ask for the price per can (*bu*) or *pyi*.
- Fresh coffee and tea are by the pound (0.45 kg).
- Meat, fish and shrimps are in quantities of 10 ticals.
- Flowers are by the stalk, garland or bunch (*d'zee*).
- Biscuits are by the pound or *viss*.
- Milk is by the *viss*.
- Oil is by the *viss* or 100 *viss*.
- Potatoes are by the *viss*.
- Leafy vegetables are by the bunch.
- Large vegetables such as marrow, gourds and melons are priced per piece or, sometimes, even by slice.
- Eggs are by number.
- Soya sauce is by the bottle.
- Fish sauce is by the *viss*.

Textiles

- Textiles are generally by the yard.
- Woven sarong fabric is by the piece. On average, this is 2 yards (1.82 m) of a standard 1 yard (91 cm) width.

Others

Medicine may be sold per tablet or capsule, as well as by the bottle. Petrol/gasoline is by the *gallon* (pronounced "ga-lan").

These are very general guidelines only meant to show how quotations vary from item to item. You can see the great variety of units used at local markets. The People's Market beside the river in Yangon (formerly known as the Keighley Wholesale Market) where vegetables and fruits were sold at wholesale prices has been moved to a new multi-storey building in the Ahlone area and is now less muddy perhaps but seems to lack local colour; it used to be noisy and quite fascinating to watch the labourers bringing in the produce from the boats, wading in ankle-deep mud, up the riverbanks to the godowns or warehouses.

BARGAINING

Government-owned shops will have fixed prices, but elsewhere bargaining extensively is needed only where prices are obviously high. In most cases where prices are only a little above what you know to be the average, it may not be worth the hassle of bargaining on a daily basis.

However, in the case of clothes or fabric, the price quoted might be double or more the true price. You will have to find fault with the goods in question in order to give the seller the chance of lowering his price without a great loss of face.

Throughout this process, you must not show anger or impatience. If you do, you are already the loser. Myanmar customers often walk away from a stall so that the seller will call them back and give them a better price, although sometimes he may even call their bluff and let them leave. However, be reasonable. He is doing a business and has to make a profit, not just break even.

Keep your cool and be persistent but charming. Be good-humoured and give in with grace if you want to buy an item badly enough but are unable to get a lower price. Alternatively, get your local friends to buy it for you if you must have it. The only trouble with this is that they may decide to give it to you as a present and you could find yourself insisting on repaying them the money. If this is the case, all you can do is give them some other present in return.

Bargaining Etiquette

Never bargain for an item and then leave the shop without buying it. This is very bad bargaining manners and suggests you lack finesse. It is best to make sure that an item is something you really want before you start to bargain for a lower price. Otherwise you'll be obliged to take something which you were only vaguely interested in.

HEALTH AND EMERGENCIES

The tropical weather and the unusual food can easily cause health problems for visitors.

The extreme heat in the daytime also makes one perspire, which tends to cause colds and flu. Coughs are usually thick and, because of the climate, take some time to go away. For such minor ailments, your own medicine chest should be sufficient.

In other cases, the best medicine is preventive medicine. Remember that tap water is unsafe for drinking and must always be boiled. When you eat out, keep away from uncooked food, ice in drinks, raw vegetables and cut fruit. Fruit should be washed in your own home and then cut before eating.

Don't rush to experience everything local at once. Slow exposure may build up some immunity, but even then one should be careful.

In the absence of food and drug laws, antibiotics and other products that would normally be dispensed only on prescription can be freely purchased in the local market. However, you should really be careful when buying drugs

like this. It is best to bring in your own supplies if you can, bearing in mind the expiry date on medicine packets and bottles.

Alternative Medicine Supply

During your stay, you may take trips to the more developed countries near Myanmar. When you do, it is a good idea to plan some time to seek medical treatment for less urgent problems and to stock up on medicines that are in low supply.

For serious ailments that cannot wait, there are clinics with good reputations. The Diplomatic Hospital has specialist doctors who attend to expatriates, visitors and the diplomatic corps.

The University Hospital is small but could attend to emergencies. There is also the Yangon General Hospital and many other private clinics and hospitals.

Myanmar contacts are necessary in order to get quick action and to be able to consult the best doctors who are rather few in number these days, a large number of them having emigrated to many countries overseas.

EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

Before the nationalisation of all schools there were many private institutions, mostly set up by the missions before World War II. Children of foreigners often attended these schools as classes were in English. The University also held classes in English.

However, since the 1960s all education has been conducted in the Myanmar language, except of course for English classes. Foreign children are thus unable to join local schools but must be sent to the Yangon International School. Alternatively, they can go to boarding school back home or in neighbouring countries like Singapore, Thailand and India.

There is a Japanese school in Myanmar to cater for the large number of Japanese expatriate children, as well as a German school for German children. Since the late 1990s many private educational centres have sprung up for

Myanmar children but these are expensive and charge fees in US dollars; teaching staff may be native English speakers but may not have adequate qualifications. Parents can inquire at their respective embassies for more information.

RECREATION

Many visitors to Myanmar complain of the lack of a 'proper' nightlife, even in the capital and major cities. Nightclubs, discos and massage parlours exist in the main cities of Yangon and Mandalay but not on the scale of Bangkok. Karaoke lounges are becoming popular in Yangon.

Local people spend small fortunes on video recorders and DVD players and spend their free time watching the latest movies (foreign and local), sports events and popular songs and shows in the comfort of their own homes. Video tapes, VCDs and DVDs from abroad are all copied as Myanmar has no copyright laws at present. Satellite dishes are allowed in the country and the well-to-do have one in their home which allows them to tune in to *Star TV*, *BBC*, *CNN* and so on.

Cinemas mostly show the very popular Hong Kong kung fu movies and cheaper Western movies, such as Italian cowboy films. Local movies are usually heavy drama of the soap-opera kind, dealing with family life, moral dilemmas, youth and student problems, political themes not being allowed. Myanmar movies resemble Indian movies in many ways: there are a lot of songs and dances, a bit of humour and a bit of pathos. Mothers gasp and die in the arms of long-lost or prodigal children (or vice versa); feasts are always eaten and coy expressions are exchanged between leading actors and actresses. These are accepted cinematic conventions and are acted in stereotypical ways—Myanmar actors and actresses have no wish to appear natural!

Lately, Myanmar video dramas have become very popular and many young TV stars have risen to fame.

Libraries and Bookshops

Government and educational institutions have their own libraries but these are only open to staff and students. Generally, lack of funds has limited the number of books

purchased and imports of books, even textbooks, have been seriously affected by the lack of foreign exchange allocations. In any case, those who can read heavy technical textbooks have dwindled in numbers.

Libraries at the United States and British embassies have large memberships as those who can read English tend to go there to read current newspapers and magazines, as well as the latest books.

Bookshops stock secondhand bestselling novels which can either be loaned on a deposit or bought. Non-fiction and technical books or magazines (some of them stolen from postal channels) end up in such stores. A large number of books are sold off by families as scrap and even valuable books will be among those recycled and made into paper bags and exercise books.

Organised Recreation

Recreation for expatriates includes local tennis clubs, golf clubs, sailing clubs, as well as embassy-run softball, tennis and swimming leagues. The Australian Embassy, for example, has a large sports complex and a club house.

TRANSPORTATION

Expatriates in Myanmar often have their own car and even a chauffeur. If you do your own driving (especially if you're a woman), be careful of being set up by other vehicles or pedestrians who will stage an accident and then try to extort a sum of money from you.

Trishaw drivers tend to do that, but they are rather few these days and are allowed to ply only in some areas.

Traffic moves on the right in Myanmar. Gridlock traffic jams have not yet arrived in Yangon but that situation may not be far off. Also, traffic rules do not seem to exist in Myanmar. Cars make U-turns where they shouldn't or drive through red lights, while bikes, motorbikes and scooters all want right of way. Bicycles and motorbikes have been banned from Yangon streets now, causing much inconvenience to locals as the public transportation system is still quite poorly developed.

The horse-drawn carriage is still used in some rural towns.

Traffic police are quick to slap fines on motorists, even for minor offences or when it is really the pedestrians who are at fault. The motorist in Myanmar is always wrong, so you just can't win.

When you see official-looking cars (usually large, black and shiny with darkened windows) it is best to draw aside if you can.

In Mandalay, which has a very flat terrain, everyone uses bicycles to get about, including women and girls.

Public Transportation

In Yangon, the pre-war buses are always a source of wonder because they are still running after all these years. Gears are wooden sticks and the floors are wooden planks. They crunch loudly and jerk with every change of gear, so you usually have a lurching, bumpy ride. Nevertheless, things would have been much worse if it wasn't for their existence these many years.

Another well-used means of transport is the pick-up truck. This has a roof and benches in the back but you can have the comfortable seat in the front with the driver if you pay a bit more. These small trucks were imported, mostly by merchant seamen capitalising on their visits home by reselling them. If you ride in the back, be sure

to mind your head when you get on and off as the roof is very low.

All forms of public transportation have a driver and a ticket collector known as a *sa peya* (literally from the English, "spare"). One pays for a ticket but may or may not get one; it depends on the ticket-collector's mood. These *sa peya* often hold a handful of notes lengthwise between their fingers and give you your change from this. However, it is better to have exact fare money with you since he may well forget to give you your change. Their attitude frequently makes you feel too intimidated to ask!

Small or large 'Hino' buses also run. They are always packed and you have to ride them with great care, holding on to something all the time. Even pregnant women can be seen precariously standing on the steps, hanging on. At least these buses can't go very fast. The roads are not conducive to speeding as they have potholes in areas that are not major thoroughfares.

It is common, in Myanmar, to see people hanging by their fingers and toes on the buses. Here, the bus conductor is receiving payment for one more person to squeeze onto the overflowing bus.

Trishaws—bicycles with a side-car attached—are called *sy-kar* (from "side-car"). Two people can sit in the side car, one facing front and the other facing back. Very stout people are not advised to ride in this type of vehicle.

Rail transportation is unreliable. A train circles the city but it does not appear to be well-used. Rail travel has certainly declined in quality since colonial times and there has been no extensive change in the gauge size of the rail tracks since the British laid them. Their narrowness thus makes for a very uncomfortable ride.

Long-distance coaches run from depots in the suburbs. On the whole, travel by road is preferable to travel by rail, boat or plane. Consequently, every Myanmar family aspires to have its own car.

LUGYONE 'COURIER' ACTIVITY

This is one very Myanmar activity which is notable and in which you will find yourself participating if you stay long enough in the country. It's very much a necessity because the relatively closed nature of the country means that the influx of goods between Myanmar and the outside is very much impeded.

The expatriate Myanmar, no matter where they may be living, need to consume things Myanmar and hence they need to have things brought over from Myanmar by *lugyone*—literally a person going your way or the way you ask him to go. If you are looking for a person to accompany you to a certain destination in Myanmar, you can often tag along with a *lugyone*. Alternatively, if you are looking for someone to carry something to a certain person in a distant place, then a *lugyone* is your man (or woman).

On the other hand, expatriate Myanmar abroad need to send things to relatives and friends back home, so the *lugyone* can help them out, either for free or for a courier fee which will cover some of their expenses.

I can remember with gratitude a *lugyone* who brought me oral polio vaccine to be given to my daughter. She carried this all the way from Bangkok in a vacuum flask packed with dry ice. The trouble that some *lugyone* go to can hardly be repaid.

Some articles might be needed urgently, such as medical supplies, vaccines, letters, books and spare car or TV parts. In addition, luxury food like chocolates, ice-cream, hamburgers, fried chicken and even doughnuts are carried.

Part of the reason for this activity (which is so constant as to be a nuisance) is the inadequate postal system in Myanmar. Parcels and letters often go mysteriously missing and consequently nothing of value can be sent this way. Another reason is the difficulty of getting things foreign in Myanmar and things that are from Myanmar in places abroad.

The latter concern is not so bad nowadays as many Asians have migrated to the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. As a lot of Myanmar cooking ingredients are similar to those used by Indians, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese, cooking Myanmar food in a foreign country is not as impossible as it once was. At one time, it used to be that even very strong smelling ingredients like fish paste would have to be carried from Myanmar by a long-suffering *lugyone* who would find on arrival that all the paste had become moist and leaked all over his clothes! Similarly, Indian mango pickles (pickles made in Myanmar

according to an Indian recipe full of oil and spices) would be carried in luggage and subsequently stains everything when the airplane altitude caused the oil to bubble over.

Nowadays, things are neater; pickles are made without the oil, which can be added at the destination and fish paste can be found where there are Thais living. Even the national dish *mohinga* can be bought in a deep-frozen form and carried by merchant seamen who have the use of the ship's freezer! So the Myanmar no longer need to hanker for supplies from home. Myanmar nationals in Singapore, for example, can visit the Peninsula Plaza (nearest MRT station: City Hall) and obtain all kinds of Myanmar foods, handicrafts and textiles. They can also purchase various products in demand in Myanmar and give them as presents when they return home. Money can also be remitted from these Myanmar shops.

One exception is that very Myanmar food, *lepet*. This recipe of pickled tea leaves, with its ingredients of garlic, beans, peanuts and sesame seeds, is not available outside Myanmar and must still be carried by somebody prepared to risk a pungent and oily leakage!

As a foreigner and a visitor, it is more than likely that you will be requested to carry something to or from Myanmar at one time or another, depending on how well your friends know you and how reliable you seem to be. If you are requested it means that you are honoured enough to be the right person to ask!

On your part, you may either refuse or agree to help with these requests, depending on your ability to carry them. If you agree, it means that you show appreciation for your host's/friend's kindness to you; if you refuse you will possibly be noted as a person without a sense of *ah-nar-hmu*!

FOOD AND ENTERTAINING

CHAPTER 6

'Burmese food is for eating mainly just before morning's pleasantness is lost to the heat of noon, and again as the cool of evening falls, and eating together is buttress against dusk's approach.'
—Mi Mi Khaing, *Cook and Entertain the Burmese Way*

FEASTS (SOON-KYWAY)

The most common type of entertaining in Myanmar is feasting, the meals offered to monks and laymen for religious reasons. In addition to the food, gifts like dried provisions, robes, slippers and medicines as well as cash donations are offered. The objective is to gain merit in the religious sense and the greater the number of people fed, the greater the merit. Not surprisingly, people in rural areas get into debt over feasts like these!

At this type of feast, which can be held either in a monastery or at home, the guest monks will first recite prayers and give blessings. After this they are offered a meal in return, usually as sumptuous as the donor can afford. Once the monks have been served the guests may be seen to.

Because monks keep many precepts, one of which prohibits eating after noon, these feasts are either held at dawn (anytime between 4 am and 6 am) or in the late morning (about 10 am or 11 am). The feast should not take place too close to 12 pm as that would not give the monks enough time to finish their meal.

This type of feast is offered especially on birthdays, at funerals, for novitiation ceremonies and on the anniversaries of deaths. Newlyweds may also hold one to gain merit together and sometimes they are offered as thanks for getting that new job, receiving a windfall or bringing home one's first pay-packet.

Other types of communal feasting are at birthday parties, usually for children and gatherings of close friends at home on the weekends.

In Yangon, Mandalay or the larger towns, foreign visitors are likely at some time to be invited for either tea at 3 pm or 4 pm. or an evening dinner at around 7 pm. If you are invited to lunch it is around noon, somewhat early by Western standards. So, if you are a late sleeper you should have only a light breakfast. The Myanmar host usually offers guests a really hearty meal and would be disappointed if you did not do justice to it.

Invitations to Feasts

In rural areas, you could be invited to a novitiation ceremony and feast where you can see the traditional dress and customs of the whole ceremony, from beginning to end.

Myanmar people usually invite whole families to a feast. Of course, not everyone has to go, but it is part of the duty of the host and hostess to invite everyone they possibly can, including extended families—the norm in Myanmar. However, usually *ah-nar-hmu* (the feeling of not wishing to cause inconvenience or impose) will take control and only a few representative members of a family will turn up at the feast.

The reason that Myanmar invite 'everyone' is also the result of *ah-nar-hmu*, as to leave anyone out would be a great loss of face. Actually, as long as there is no enmity between the two parties, there is no real reason to leave anyone out and not to invite a person is tantamount to meaning that there is no more friendly feeling left. On the part of host and hostess, the whole purpose of a feast is to feed and provide for as many as possible.

On the practical side, Myanmar food is never prepared for a fixed number of servings but is rather on the lavish side, to accommodate as many guests as one has invited without the embarrassment of food suddenly running out. The feast does not comprise a great variety of dishes but is made up of large quantities of four or five dishes served by

a large number of helpers. The dishes are cooked earlier, sometimes even the night before, and are kept covered in an oil base and gravy to prevent them drying out and spoiling.

Children

Children, however small they may be, are never considered a hindrance or nuisance but are generally adored. They are always included in invitations and you can be sure your hostess will enjoy having them, trying to entertain them and exclaiming over them (especially Caucasian children who seem like dolls with their blond hair or blue eyes). Try not to get annoyed if everyone tries to caress your child or baby because of their unusual looks.

INTRODUCTIONS

Among Myanmar, introductions are seldom made. At any gathering, the conversation tends to be general and not much will be revealed about the people. This does not imply a lack of curiosity, as once one can get hold of someone who knows another you can be sure that he will be asked all sorts of questions to fill in the missing information. The real introduction and all relevant details about background, parents, children, scandals, prominent relatives and past history will be revealed only after a person has left and the remaining guests asked, "Who was that?"

When meeting foreigners, however, introductions are usually made. It is a custom now to exchange namecards, calling cards or visiting cards if you carry them.

Get Names Right

Considering the difficulty of Myanmar names, which we have already discussed in previous chapters, it is best to try and concentrate on remembering a person by at least one of his names. Although Myanmar men and women will often address each other using full names, as a foreigner you will be excused for sticking to just one.

The Myanmar are aware of the difficulties and will be likely to tell you what they wish to be called. For example,

if you are introduced to someone named U Khin Maung Win, he may say, "Please call me Win", even though all his Myanmar friends must call him by the complete name together with its honorific prefix. It is better not to call him Khin or Maung; Khin is a girl's name when it stands alone, while Maung is a common name, used, for instance, by his wife.

Personal Particulars

When meeting foreigners it is quite common for Myanmar people to ply them with questions about age, marital status, children, occupation, salary and other questions which Westerners would consider intolerably intrusive. However, the Myanmar are generally easy-going and would volunteer such information about themselves to show friendliness. They do not consider such questioning an invasion of privacy at all when dealing with outsiders.

If the Myanmar see a man and woman who live together it is assumed they are married and they might be very puzzled when one of them turns up again with another partner. You could say they are naive. Even if you are married, don't be surprised if they express some shock or dismay that you don't have children.

In Myanmar reasoning, it is incomprehensible not to want a child, unless, of course, there is something wrong with you or you have too many already!

Information about age and rank is important to the Myanmar so that they may correctly address each other and not offend. Myanmar people do not feel any need to hide their age and this usually goes for women too. You will undoubtedly be asked how old you are and your frank answer will be appreciated. However, they would be puzzled by a snub and if you really do not wish to reply you could just say, "I'm old enough to be …" or "I'm still a baby." Such friendly answers reveal nothing but are not as offensive as a refusal and you would not be pressed further. It is important to keep your good humour and not to take offence where none is meant. Myanmar genuinely find it hard to guess the age of Caucasians.

On the other hand, Myanmar men and women may increase or decrease their age for various reasons. Increasing it is usually for the purpose of enrolling in school earlier and thereby taking important examinations earlier. Decreasing is for deferring retirement. You may ask how this can be possible. Generally, it's due to poor records, offices being frequently relocated, forgeries undetected, bribes acceptable and files eaten by termites or simply lost!

Compliments

As with other Asian cultures, compliments are usually hard for the Myanmar individual to handle; they are inclined to be more embarrassed than flattered since they are brought up to be modest. The usual reply might just be a shy smile rather than a straight-faced "thank you". Paying a compliment to a woman is even more likely to receive a silent non-response.

Among the Myanmar it is seldom that one would compliment a person on his or her clothes. The classic good-humoured reply to a compliment like "How nice you look," might be, "Oh, you know, I haven't even taken a bath yet!" (implying, "I would look even better after a bath," or "I look this good even before a bath.")

To a compliment like, "What a pretty blouse!" the reply might be, "That's because I'm wearing it" or "Is it just the blouse that looks great? Aren't you going to compliment the wearer?" This is a typically coy answer. The point is, the Myanmar are uncomfortable with compliments.

Sincere, simple statements are better than lavish and effusive compliments which your local friends will not know how to take.

DRESS

For invitations to morning ceremonies, feasts and special occasions, casual wear is appropriate but not shorts and T-shirts. A good choice for women would be light summer dresses or sleeved blouses/shirts with flared skirts (in case you should have to sit on carpets at floor level). For men, a shirt and tie is advisable but not a full suit. If you should be invited

to a ceremony being held at a monastery, women should be sure to wear a sleeved dress or blouse and longish skirts.

For the evening, dinner dresses are fine as long as they are not revealing, low cut or strapless. Being covered up helps to avoid mosquito bites as well as frowns or stares from hosts. For men short-sleeved shirts and trousers are appropriate. It is better to avoid shorts although your host may say the dress code is casual.

GIFTS

When visiting a Myanmar home for a meal it is good to take along a gift to show your appreciation. Chocolates, cookies, fruits and sweets are all acceptable gifts.

As with funerals and other special occasions, flowers do not have great significance as a gift. Flower cultivation has not played much part in the agricultural scene in Myanmar. Herbs and medicinal plants are cultivated but flowers are sold as altar offerings or for women to put in their hair rather than to adorn living rooms.

Similarly, it is not advisable to give flowers to sick friends but rather food items such as fruits, biscuits, bread, cordials or various powdered drinks such as Ovaltine, Milo, Horlicks and Sustagen.

Useful Gifts

Consumer items are appreciated: toys and crayons for children; toiletries and cosmetics for the hostess; calendars and diaries near the start of the year; and ballpoint pens and shirts for the host are all suitable since they are hard to obtain and usually beyond the average household budget.

Liquor and cigarettes can also be given if your host smokes and drinks alcohol. Even if he doesn't, selling these on the black market will give him a good return which he can use to buy something he really needs. While smoking cigarettes is common among men, women will smoke cheroots, if at all. Drinking alcohol is less common because of the Buddhist Precepts and women very rarely do so. Only the more Westernised and well-travelled Myanmar are likely to consume alcohol.

Giving items like luxury underwear, handmade dolls, rare cheeses and bath salts are unlikely to be appreciated since these items are not commonly used. It is everyday essentials which are lacking.

Avoid giving used and secondhand articles; even though these may be useful to your hosts, their pride could be offended. If you wish to do so, it should be when you leave the country for good and are really clearing out your things. Enquire gently if any of your unwanted things could possibly be used by anyone.

The Myanmar would give their own cast-offs to less wealthy relatives living in the rural provinces, to nephews, nieces, grandchildren or domestic staff. Such hand-me-downs are not given as important gifts but only incidentally, or in addition to better presents.

Pieces of cloth for your hostess are also nice gifts, especially when you know her better and you are able to guess her taste in materials and patterns. General favourites with Myanmar women are batik pieces (which are worn as *longyis*), Thai silk and cotton. For a Myanmar-style blouse, one metre or just over a yard is sufficient, while a *longyi* takes about two metres, depending on the size of the lady. All clothes are tailor-made, hence the interest in cloth rather than in clothes. Such presents are often shared by mothers and daughters.

It seems that buying cloth to make into *longyi* and blouses is a favourite activity for all Myanmar women and the markets are full of cloth stalls selling colourful pieces. Even remnants are good enough and there are remnant stalls where one has to crawl and crouch to get at pieces of cloth piled up all over the floor. This proves two things about life in Myanmar: firstly, it is possible to make money out of even remnants and, secondly, that no matter how high inflation soars and incomes fall, Myanmar women are still trying to look their best.

If you wish to wear Myanmar clothes made from materials of your choice there are good tailors whom your friends will be able to recommend. The cost is very reasonable compared to the cost in some of the more

developed countries in the region. Western clothes may also be tailored by experienced tailors, who are usually Indian or Chinese.

ADVICE ON GIFT-GIVING

You may be surprised to hear protests when you give someone a gift. They say, "You shouldn't have bothered," or "You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble." These protests are sincerely meant. The Myanmar people genuinely feel that, in friendship, it is not important whether you give presents or not.

Your gift will probably not be opened in your presence unless you ask your friend to do so. The reason is to avoid appearing avaricious. Similarly, once your present has been opened you may not hear effusive words of appreciation. Your friend is here suffering from that national feeling called *ah-nar-de* (see Chapter Three) which places him in a dilemma: to accept your gift too readily would appear greedy, but not to accept it would be equally rude.

Gifts

Do not be disappointed by what seems like a lack of appreciation and don't worry that the gift was not a good choice: it will always be considered valuable in some way. He can resell it to get something he really needs if he cannot use it himself. While you may be hurt by this, you must remember the economic situation in Myanmar. In the long run it is surely better for a friend to get what he needs rather than what he doesn't.

He may not let on whether the gift you give is to his liking or not but, underneath, he will be pleased and grateful that you have given him something and that he has not been forgotten.

SEATING AT MEALS

Seating at Myanmar meals is never important because the typical table is round; unless your host is familiar with

Western customs, he will probably not seat you and you may have to choose for yourself.

In typical village homes, the table is low and round and you sit either on small stools or on mats. In urban homes, Western-style tables and chairs are more common. At a square or oblong table the head of the family or the most senior member will sit at the head of the table. The mother will sit beside the father and serve him food first. If there are other older people present, such as grandfather or grandmother they must be served first. If the oldest or most senior person is not present, a small portion of food is spooned up and then put back in the dish as a gesture that the person has been remembered. Younger people are not supposed to take their first bite or taste until the elders have been served.

This is not strictly followed in every family. For example, very young children may be fed first at mealtimes. Generally, however, women tend to eat last at any meal since they are often busy with serving up the food and refilling dishes. Menfolk are pampered; they have to be served with water and anything else their tastebuds suddenly tell them should be added to the meal.

In homes where there are servants, they will perform these serving tasks. But, when entertaining guests, it is

usual for the womenfolk (the mother and daughters) to eat last as they serve guests and the men.

What to Do and Say

A typical Myanmar meal will have all the dishes spread out and is not served in courses. Do not be surprised if the hostess and children do not join you. They may prefer to stand around and serve you, fan you with a palm fan (to keep occasional flies away) and see to your other needs.

Portions of each dish are taken and placed next to the rice which is in the centre of the plate. Usually a fork and spoon are used. Use the spoon to eat the rice, meat and vegetable dishes. For soups, a Chinese spoon, shaped with the handle sloping upwards is usually provided. If not, you must use the same spoon for the soup.

A small, shallow saucer beside your plate is for placing any discarded bones.

The Myanmar normally use their fingers to eat, although they do not do so when they have foreign visitors. Because of the habit, many dining rooms have a small sink or basin in one corner for the purpose of washing the hands and mouth after a meal.

Being belittled for eating with fingers, as if it was a barbarous habit, had one friend asking his tormentor, "So, do you eat with your feet?" This is a sensitive issue and it is best not to ask about it unless you yourself wish to try it.

There is a way to eat neatly with the fingers: mix enough rice for a mouthful with some meat or gravy into a rough ball. Then, draw the fingers into a bud and pop the food into your mouth. It is a natural way to eat and many Myanmar people dislike using forks and spoons, which they may be clumsy handling. If they have to, they prefer to use just the spoon and not the fork.

Conversation will tend to be minimal as the Myanmar are not great conversationalists over dinner. The objective in eating is to enjoy the food. Western dining, with its leisurely style of savouring food (and wine) while enjoying dining room conversation, is not the norm here. The talk is

livelier over a pot of tea and snacks rather than at dinner. Talking business over dinner at someone's home is also considered rather bad taste, especially if other guests or the hostess do not know much about business or do not know the language fluently.

One should ask questions about the food, the way dishes are prepared and cooked and about ingredients. Questions about ceremonies and other general topics are also suitable as your host and hostess will usually enjoy answering them.

FOOD

Myanmar food consists largely of oil-based curries, salads with fresh or boiled vegetables, various types of salted fish recipes and soups, all of which are eaten with rice. Herbs are nearly always used, the common ones being ginger, turmeric, garlic, chilli, lemon grass, spring onions and coriander.

Myanmar food has not seen much refinement over the years as the country has been closed for so long. There has not been much room or opportunity for improvement. For one thing the quality and variety of ingredients has been desperately lacking which limits good cuisine. It is also rather difficult to obtain good fare at restaurants simply because there have not been that many tourists who would be interested in local food. For the most part Myanmar food remains simple and dishes are usually ungarnished in any way.

A dish you like is a feast, a real friend is a relative.
—Myanmar saying

Myanmar food is best sampled in homes. Good Myanmar cuisine is hard to find, even more so in a typical Myanmar setting. Several large cities around the world have Myanmar restaurants (good ones can be found in London, Boston and Philadelphia it seems) but in Myanmar itself they are ironically rare, except in big towns like Yangon and Mandalay. Even then, these are rarely top-notch restaurants.

Preparations for Myanmar food take a long time and cooking has to be done in advance, unlike Chinese food

which is usually cooked upon order. This may also be a reason for the reluctance of entrepreneurs to invest in Myanmar cuisine. Also, with an uncertain clientele, the risk of unsold food is perhaps too great.

There are places where delicious Myanmar food is dished out of big pots and served up fresh and hot, but generally the setting is rather poor as no one has the time or money to spare a thought on decor.

As Myanmar opens up, it is expected that with demand there will soon be much more competition in serving authentic Myanmar cuisine. Until then, try to wangle an invitation from your Myanmar hosts!

The Art of Home Cooking

In Myanmar, food is generally bought and cooked fresh, and the older generation particularly prefer shopping to be done every morning. Daily markets selling fresh food are usually nearby. Because storage is a problem in Myanmar's heat and the soaring temperatures at certain times of the year can cause some food to become stale in a matter of hours, it is safer to throw old food away. Even where there are refrigerators, many do not keep cooked foods in them but only water bottles! Storage in cat safes is the usual method of preserving food for the day and keeping it away from insects

and flies. The cat safe is a small cupboard with doors and sides made of mesh. It has four legs which stand in small earthen bowls of water to prevent ants from climbing up.

Myanmar women cook without written recipes and the only way to really learn from them is to watch and measure with your eyes the quantities of ingredients, herbs and spices. Most women learn this way, by watching mothers, aunts, older sisters and friends.

One of my favourite aunts will begin cooking and then trot off to the garden to practise her golf-putting, returning at specific intervals to stir the pot and add herbs—so fine is her sense of timing!

The lack of specific measuring should not be mistaken for a slap-dash style of cooking. Myanmar cooks are very precise and 'timing' is essential.

Myanmar women love to cook for large gatherings; in fact a good cook must be one who can reproduce the same culinary delights regardless of the size of the pot. This requires great skill as cooking in large proportions can easily go wrong: the fire may not be hot enough, the pot not deep enough, or the ingredients not in proportion.

Cooking methods do not differ much between the villages and towns, although the kitchen, utensils and fuels might vary. In the villages, wood fires are most common and pots are either earthenware (for sour or slow-cooking dishes) or aluminium coated with mud to keep the metal from turning black. In the towns, electrical appliances and even microwaves are used only by the more affluent but nearly every home will have a rice-cooker.

A Typical Myanmar Meal

Home-cooked meals can be very elaborate. A complete meal traditionally includes a main dish of meat or fish, a vegetable dish, dips or sauces to eat with blanched or pickled vegetables and a soup. It could also include side dishes such as fried dried shrimps known as *balachaung* and a salad as well as a second or third vegetable dish.

The main meat or fish dish will usually be in the form of a curry with an oil base. The spices, onions and garlic

are pounded in a stone mortar with a pestle (found in every Myanmar home) and then cooked in oil before the meat or fish is added. While there is not much variety of meat, there are a lot of different types of freshwater fish which the Myanmar love to eat and actually prefer above meat.

There are also a large variety of vegetables, leaves, shoots and young fruits which can either be cultivated or obtained from the wild.

However, due to inflation most Myanmar people (especially in urban areas) are unable to afford such elaborate meals any more. Meat is very expensive and, if there is any at all, it is usually mixed with vegetables to make it go further. Prices of even common meat substitutes like eggs, dried fish and beans have risen.

Indian and Chinese Influences

Being geographically situated between two great nations, India and China, it is inevitable that Myanmar food should be influenced by Chinese and Indian cuisine. Indian spices are used in curries, as is Chinese soy sauce. Stir-frying and steaming methods are widely used and many Myanmar stall owners will serve Indian or Chinese food.

Malay and Peranakan influences can be seen particularly in cakes and desserts where coconut flavouring, pandan (screw pine) leaves and rice flour bases have become common.

The Myanmar themselves will go to Chinese restaurants on special occasions and to entertain guests. It is not usual to go to Indian restaurants as they are now rarely found since the large exodus of Indians in the 1970s. However, Indian briyani made with chicken is very popular at feasts because it is a one-dish meal that is considered quite sumptuous in view of the price of meat.

Western Food

English food is very much appreciated, although more so by those who lived and worked during colonial times. It was possible to obtain good English roasts, mixed grills and

soups in many hotels until about the late 1960s. After this they all died a natural death due to the lack of people to cook these meals, the lack of good ingredients and a lack of customers.

Many of the hotels in Yangon and Mandalay serve all kinds of Western food in their restaurants and buffet promotions are very trendy.

Traditional Dishes

Traditional dishes have many versions around the country. One of the most famous is *mohinga*, thin or flat rice noodles eaten with a fish-based soup. Other versions have different types of soups. A bean powder sauce or soup is often used in areas where good freshwater fish cannot be obtained easily and beans and pulses are abundant.

This dish is the favourite of all Myanmar people and they especially love to eat it early in the morning before going to work. When served piping hot with fresh crisps and sprinkled with chopped coriander, the smell really is enough to make your mouth water. It seems one can find it almost anywhere. Itinerant pedlars, with a pot hanging from one side of a yoke-like pole, and a small table and stools hanging from the other, will sell *mohinga* on the street.

Alternatively, you can try it in the larger shops. New *mohinga* shops turn up all the time and are heard of by word of mouth. Each of these will be tried out and a verdict passed. Myanmar friends will gladly point you in the direction of their favourite shops and stalls, and if you ask nicely they may even cook it for you at home!

Mohinga is also served to monks and guests at feasts as it is a neat one-dish meal. It is cooked in large pots in the monastery grounds or at home by family and relatives, all of whom are expected to help out at feasts, if only to pour out plain tea for the helpers.

Another traditional dish which is often served at feasts and celebrations is *ohno-khauk-swe*. This consists of Chinese-style yellow noodles and is eaten with chicken in a coconut-based sauce. It is very rich and filling and if

eaten too often it tends to cause headaches, indigestion and high blood pressure as the coconut base is full of oil. Sometimes evaporated milk can be substituted. The Thais in Chiang Mai, close to the Myanmar border, make a similar dish called *khow swoy*.

As in all countries, each region has its specialities and food traditions. Mandalay is famous for its *mee-shay*, rice noodles which are mixed with pickled tofu, pork and preserved mustard. Pyin-oo-lwin specialises in a tofu salad; the Shan state has a dish called 'Shan sour rice'; and Mawlamyine its durian and mango preserves. Due to its abundance of pineapples, Dawei has pineapple rice, while the Dry Zone's toddy palm is used to make a sugar called jaggery and an alcoholic wine called 'toddy'.

As for snacks, common ones include glutinous rice cakes wrapped in banana leaves and steamed; fritters of various vegetables; and *lepet*, tea leaves marinated in oil with dried shrimps, garlic and sesame seeds.

Drinks

Plain water is usually drunk after food as most prefer not to drink it before and during meals.

Small roadside shops will serve plain tea which is free. Wine would be served only at homes of Westernised Myanmar as abstaining from intoxicating drinks is one of the Five Precepts all Buddhists are supposed to keep. For this reason, being a drinker is a bit of a stigma in Myanmar. Village drunks who lie about after drinking 'toddy' are the only models with which drinkers are compared and there is no room for social drinking, except among Westernised Myanmar.

At meals, mostly soups or green tea are taken as drinks. On special occasions local soft drinks known as aerated waters are served. These drinks mostly consist of sugar and colouring, with carbonated water added. They are of a low quality but are popular with children.

Pepsi Cola has arrived in Myanmar but is in bottled form and is quite expensive for the average household budget.

Fruit

Myanmar has many different kinds of fruit because of the wide variations in climate between regions.

Tropical fruits like mangos come in many varieties and are available from March to July. The Myanmar eat mangos in all shapes, sizes and stages of growth, from the small sweet ones to the large green ones which are still sour and used in salads.

From about June to October, jackfruit is available. There are two kinds of jackfruit, one with firm flesh and the other with a sweet, fibrous, slimy flesh. Other fruits that are abundant include guava, watermelon, rambutan, pomelo, banana, plum, papaya, lychee, grapes and pineapple.

Temperate fruits like apples, oranges, tangerines and grapefruits come from the Shan plateau which means they are not readily available in all areas because of transport problems. Strawberries are also grown in the Shan state and Pyin-oo-lwin. Again, because they do not form a normal part of consumption patterns in the rest of the country, some Myanmar believe that they actually grow on trees as they have never seen the plant!

Fruit Trivia

When eating fruit in Myanmar you should be aware of a number of things. Firstly, with mangos do be careful not to eat too close to the stem as the sap can give you a very sore throat. The Myanmar cut off the stem and put the whole fruit in water for some time so that the sap flows out before peeling the skin off.

A stain from a mangosteen is very difficult to remove and did you know that the number of calyxes on top of the fruit shows how many segments there are inside? Similarly, the stripes of a melon show where the seeds lie and if you cut along the lines you will be able to remove the seeds easily.

Custard apples, a fist-sized fruit with scaly skin and soft white flesh, contains many small seeds which you should be careful of around children. There are many stories of children and babies having to go to hospital after inserting seeds in noses and ears when playing.

It's B.Y.O. (Bring-Your-Own)

Food prices have gone up so much that most workers will carry their own food boxes to work and share them with colleagues.

Women workers will carry a small, oblong basket of cane or bamboo and put their food box and flask in it. In urban areas, buses will be crowded with women workers precariously hanging on to the strap or seat back with one arm and clinging to their lunch baskets with the other. The men, many of whom go to work on bikes, can be seen with their lunch boxes strapped to the carrier.

Most workers usually prefer to eat their own home-cooked food despite the trouble of having to prepare and cook it before coming to work. This is because canteen fare is usually of very low quality, not to mention the adulteration of food with additives, some of which are even toxic substitutes. There have indeed been food scares in the past. This has included rumours about tissue paper being mixed with milk skin (the latter is used like cream to put in coffee or tea) and another about various toxic oils being mixed with edible oils. In addition, there tends to be a heavy use of monosodium glutamate (MSG) and saccharine or other artificial sweeteners to enhance taste.

What is certain is that you should be careful when consuming roadside food. It may look tasty but the preparation of it might be completely unhygienic. Dysentery and other intestinal diseases can be contracted from consuming such food. The Myanmar are more or less immune to many diseases through constant exposure but even expatriate Myanmar have been known to fall ill when they visit their country again after an interval.

Rice, Please!

Most Myanmar people need to eat rice at every meal, from breakfast to dinner, to feel they have really eaten. Other types of starchy and filling food are not so popular. For example, cakes and cookies are only for special occasions. Bread is consumed mostly in urban areas and then only at breakfast or teatime.

The production of flour in the country is low and imports are relied on. This makes even inferior quality biscuits and cakes expensive.

Dairy products are also scarce because there are few local dairy industries or farms. For most, the breeding of cattle is not a potential livelihood because of cultural taboos concerning animals, especially cows. It is said that the few milk suppliers that do exist can supply any number of homes—they just add water to the milk!

In any case, milk is hard to get and where you can get it, it is hard to say whether it is free of bacilli. Everyone who uses fresh milk has to boil it to ensure it is safe enough to drink.

On the whole, ice cream, cheese and butter are quite scarce. The Myanmar have not acquired a taste for cheese but most like to eat ice cream and spread butter on their bread, products which were easy to obtain at one time. Local industries produce condensed milk and butter, but not enough by far. For milk and ice cream, one goes to the Indian quarter of the towns.

Exotic Food and Delicacies

The Myanmar people eat various kinds of exotic foods which you may never get to sample unless you ask, your host fearing to insult your tastebuds or table manners with the unfamiliar. They are again served at certain times of the year when they can be obtained.

For example, pickled tea leaves (*lepet*) are a speciality served with fried peanuts, fried beans, garlic, dried prawns, sesame seeds and an oil dressing. Other delicacies include fried crickets, pickled bamboo shoots, pickled ferns, cooked field crabs, mice, snake, a type of larvae and fish innards.

In markets, one sometimes comes across deer hooves hung up together with meat, purporting to be venison. Do not be taken in by the hooves. They may be unrelated to the meat being sold!

Food Superstitions

In line with oriental tradition, the Myanmar have many food superstitions, some of which may be based on fact, others on

fiction. Sour foods, for instance, should not be consumed at the same time as milk products; sugar must not be eaten with mangosteen; nor watermelon with eggs.

The Myanmar also believe in certain foods being either 'heaty' or 'cooling'. Foods conducive to 'heatiness' are chicken, bittergourd, durian, mango, chocolate and ice. Some 'cooling' foods are pork, eggplant, dairy products, melons, cucumbers and radish.

Pregnant women should avoid bananas if they do not wish to have an overweight baby, while chilli is believed to make a baby's hair sparse. Glutinous rice is said to make the placenta stick to the womb and mushrooms and bamboo shoots can lead to unconsciousness in new mothers. After delivery, mothers are supposed to take plenty of clear soups to produce more milk and eat turmeric to avoid wind.

For sufferers of coughs and those with injuries or wounds, the fumes of frying chilli are said to increase the pain and irritation. Fried foods, oranges and cold or icy food are also bad for coughs. For relief, one should take honey and lemon, and chew on betel leaves.

Food as a Status Symbol

The economic situation in Myanmar has rendered even the staple rice expensive in comparative terms. Many people have been reduced to consuming low quality rice, even when it's been full of weevils or grains, thankful they had rice at all. This is virtually unbelievable considering the fact that Myanmar rice was once known for its quality and was therefore an important export and Myanmar was called the 'rice bowl' of the world.

Canned foods are all imported and consequently even more expensive than fresh food!

Canned sardines, which were eaten as side dishes up to the 1960s and were considered cheap substitutes for meat, are now very expensive. The same is true for instant foods and canned meats.

As for seafood, while the rivers and waters around Myanmar offer considerable varieties, some fish are ironically unaffordable or not available. Large Myanmar

prawns or lobsters are sold mostly for export and are hardly seen in the markets. A very delicious fish called *nga-myinn* (butterfish) now sells for a price way beyond most people's budgets.

This has led to a situation where even some basic foods are now considered luxuries. When they can be afforded they will generally only be served on special occasions, when entertaining guests and offering meals to monks (although, these days, even monks have experienced difficulty getting food for their begging bowls on their morning alms rounds). It has also served to add to the status implications associated with food in Myanmar.

The poor man's food is rice, fish paste (*nga-pi*) or fish sauce and a few vegetables, boiled or pickled.

Another food considered cheap and not suitable for guests is a sour chowder made of vegetables and fish or shrimps. Tamarind is often added to this to create the sour flavour. Actually, it is a delicious dish but there seems to be some hesitation when serving it to guests, possibly because of the sour taste. Also it is watery rather than oily, oil being considered the most suitable ingredient for feasts and special occasions. One look at the common feast foods that are swimming in oil is enough to make cholesterol-conscious Westerners shudder! But to stint on oil is the same as not being generous towards the guest.

Foods that imply status are meat dishes, lobsters, expensive fish like *nga-tha-lauk* (hilsa), *nga-myinn* and *nga-pe* (a fish which is scraped and pounded with spices, then rolled into balls and fried—a truly arduous process). Vegetables are local asparagus and mushrooms, both of which are expensive because they can only be obtained during their limited seasons.

It would appear that guests are second only to monks when it comes to meals. Consequently, you may find an array of different meats all lined up with only a few vegetables. This is because meat is expensive and rare, while vegetables are more common. Moreover, vegetables have not yet become the health food that they are in the

Women selling freshwater fish in the market. Fish is the staple for most Myanmar people.

West. Good quality rice and oil is essential for guests and monks.

Other Places to Eat

In Yangon and Mandalay, there are many places to eat. The majority of them are Chinese restaurants, all competing fiercely with each other. New restaurants are set up, go out of business and are taken over all the time.

Chinese restaurants are frequented by locals, especially if they are taking you out to dinner. Chinese food is considered the most luxurious type of food to offer to guests.

As mentioned earlier, Myanmar food is best sampled in the homes of Myanmar friends as really good restaurants with ambience and decor are hard to find.

Western cuisine is now found in the larger hotels, and buffet lunches and dinners at these hotels are very popular with the well-heeled Yangon elite.

Yangon boasts a large night market where all types of food are served at hawker-style stalls. However, eating here when you are not used to the food could give you a bad case of diarrhoea or, even worse, cholera. Myanmar

themselves may go with their own containers and bring food home to eat. You can also try this but you should be aware that such places are usually crowded and dingy, where dogs, mice and cats like to loiter.

Itinerant hawkers and pedlars are also found going through residential areas selling everything from boiled corn cobs, beans and groundnuts to fruit preserves and local Myanmar style cakes. If you want to buy from them, you have to walk to your gate and call them over. But you should be careful as they have been known to resort to petty theft, such as stealing flowers from your garden and walking off with your laundry when your back is turned. Be sure to keep the gate closed at all times so that it at least makes quick access difficult.

Mohinga is also sold by sellers who travel with a small table and little stools hanging on the end of a pole. They will find a place to set up their table and stools, while customers (often regulars) gather round. Sellers also carry a small stove to keep the *mohinga* hot.

Other sellers offer a poor man's meat dish called *wet thar dok hto*. This consists of pig's innards boiled in spices and soya sauce till soft and is delicious. The *dok hto* man will cut up the part which you wish to eat and put it on a thin bamboo stick. You can then dip your piece into a garlic and chilli sauce. *Dok hto* in fact means 'speared with a stick'. When you've finished eating you must hold up the sticks to be counted so that your bill can be calculated. Cheating by surreptitiously dropping your sticks on the ground can make your bill a bit less! However, this type of food is probably best avoided by weak stomachs as the innards may cause worm infestations and the sauce is dipped into by one and all.

Tea houses are also very popular for snacks and tea or coffee. In Myanmar, tea and coffee are already mixed with milk and sugar (usually sweetened condensed milk). You can get black coffee or plain tea only if you ask specially for it. Snacks are usually fried spring rolls, meat buns (Chinese buns), sandwiches and small cakes.

Tea shops are usually quite pleasant places, with small gardens where you can sit and chat. They are perhaps more

Teahouses and food stalls are popular places for the Myanmar to gather and have a small snack while chatting.

hygienic than most hawker stalls because properly cooked, hot food is available. Couples, students and retirees are the frequent customers, especially so in the outskirts of Yangon. In town, these places are filled with office workers taking a tea break and people making business deals, like selling a car or having goods cleared through customs, which can take several days.

Other food stalls are also available wherever there are markets, known locally as *zay* (bazaars). These markets sell fresh vegetables, meat, fish, dried provisions, cloth and flowers. They also have rows of tailors and miscellaneous goods stalls. It is a good experience to walk around the aisles just to get to know what types of goods are available. You do not have to buy, although every seller is sure to ask you, "What do you want?"

Catering businesses offer a useful service. They will bring a layered carrier containing about three local dishes and rice to wherever you wish to eat. However, this service is quite expensive nowadays. International fast food chains like Pizza Hut, KFC and McDonalds have not arrived yet and, even if they do, it is possible that burgers will not be as popular as traditional food because of the beef taboo

Small kiosks like this provide cheap snacks for the Myanmar.

for many Myanmar. Local pizza, burgers and french fries are available.

ENTERTAINING YOUR MYANMAR FRIENDS

Naturally, after you have been in Myanmar for some time and have made some Myanmar friends, you may want to return their hospitality by entertaining them.

Home or Restaurant?

The question of where to entertain your guests arises when you are thinking of a dinner invitation. The majority of decent restaurants are Chinese so eating out is limiting.

Home cooking is better, especially if you have the domestic staff to do the work while you supervise. The fact that you have invited people to your home will be appreciated. Moreover, restaurants do not provide much privacy. Private rooms can be booked in advance but this could prove costly.

What to Serve

When planning the menu do remember that pork and beef are the most commonly avoided meats. Pork is not consumed by those who have a tradition of worshipping *nat* (spirits) and beef is avoided by those who are devout Buddhists because the cow is highly regarded (perhaps because its existence has always been essential in pulling the paddy ploughs). Some devout Buddhists may also abstain from eating any meat obtained from four-legged animals.

During Buddhist Lent, which roughly coincides with the rainy season, some Buddhists become vegetarians and abstain from eating meat, fish and eggs. Other Buddhists will abstain from eating meat on the day of the week on which they were born. Consequently, if you cannot check on the preferences of your Myanmar guests it is always best to serve a variety of dishes.

Because rice is a staple, most Myanmar never feel they have really had a meal unless they eat it. They complain of hollow feelings, even after eating bread, but after rice they describe 'a nice cool feeling in the chest/breast' (meaning the stomach). They also do not like to eat noodles very much unless it is rice noodles. Thus, it is a good idea to serve some ordinary white rice besides bread, rolls, pastries and potatoes.

Large portions of meat are seldom consumed. Whole pork chops or slabs of beef are difficult for them to handle as their meat is almost always cooked with some vegetables. They tend to prefer fish, shrimps or prawns. Younger people may, however, consume more meat than older guests.

You should also be aware that for some Myanmar certain types of food are just too 'difficult to eat'. These include:

- raw tomatoes—in Myanmar cuisine tomatoes are usually cooked instead of eaten raw.
- avocado served as a soup—at a dinner party I once heard it described to be so bitter that it could barely be swallowed. The guest speaking hardly knew what to do after taking a

mouthful! Ripe avocado is usually consumed as a dessert, whipped with milk and sugar.

- rare beef—a frightening sight to most Myanmar, women especially.

Large quantities of about four dishes, followed by fruit and/or dessert (a kind that is stretchable like custards or cakes) should be enough to cover a whole evening. This is usually the custom at feasts when the Myanmar entertain.

Dinner Time

You may find that your guests do not eat much and this can well be because they have already eaten before coming to your party! Dinner time for most Myanmar people is around 5:30 pm or 6:30 pm. (All meal times are generally earlier because the day starts at about 5:30 am.) Thus, if invitations are for around 7:30 pm. or even later, it is unavoidable that your guests will have eaten something before coming over. This also saves them losing face by appearing exceedingly hungry!

Your guests may also leave rather early. As mentioned earlier, making small-talk and dinner party conversation is rather hard for them. Their bedtimes are also very early compared to Western standards.

Men and women will often segregate at buffets and other gatherings. Women tend to huddle together, being rather modest and shy. This is culturally ingrained and no woman would risk getting herself branded a 'bold hussy' by going over to the men's groups and joining a discussion. Neither is it because they are uninformed. In many gatherings, the wives of officials are school teachers or hold high positions in government offices. They can also probably speak English and most will have a university degree. It's just that it isn't the done thing and it's unlikely this behaviour will change just yet.

Buffets and Cocktails

These two types of entertainment are worth mentioning because most Myanmar seem to find them boring and

uncomfortable. They find it hard to eat while standing up and, even worse, standing to eat and drink.

When the Myanmar have a large crowd to a meal the group takes turns to eat at the table starting from the eldest and the youngest (children and babies), with the womenfolk coming last. Guests are never subjected to having to balance plates, cutlery and drinks while standing or having to sit on sofas. For the Myanmar, a comfortable position is important in order to enjoy a meal.

Finger foods and snacks are not defined as a proper meal and again the Myanmar tend to eat their dinner at home before going to cocktails and receptions. At the reception they will just nibble.

Buffets and cocktails are also uncomfortable for them because of the need for small talk. If spouses are invited, they particularly tend to be tongue-tied because they simply do not know how to handle conversation with strangers or unfamiliar people. Most Myanmar are intimidated by Caucasians, expecting a vast difference in cultural norms and in points of interest.

In addition, alcohol is not usually consumed so that cocktail parties may end up with most of the guests only accepting soft drinks!

Question Time

At dinners or other social occasions you will almost certainly be asked by Myanmar friends whether you have sampled their local foods yet and which ones you liked. Myanmar love to hear that you like *mohinga* (if you really do). Food and cakes may be sent over to you if you are neighbours.

You will be asked how you like other things in Myanmar. You will impress people if you go prepared with a little knowledge about their clothes and fabrics, especially handwoven textiles.

Be sure to respond positively to questions about Myanmar beaches and towns such as Mandalay and Bagan. Talk about the fresh air and the exotic Myanmar fruits and flowers rather than the lack of entertainment or the irregular electricity and water supply. The people in

Myanmar have learnt to live without night entertainment for years. They talk, sleep early, turn to religion and watch videos when they can. This is probably a healthy lifestyle, except for the high cost and generally low quality of nutritious food.

The point is, be positive about things Myanmar. Try not to compare the place or its features negatively with your own home country—at least not in conversation.

Words of Invitation When Eating	
Htine ba	Please sit down.
Saar ba	Please eat.
Aar ya paar ya saar ba	Please eat heartily.
Saar ba, ah ma na ba nai	Please do eat, do not feel *ah-nar-de*.

Sometimes during a lull in conversation Myanmar tend to grab a book or newspaper and start to read it while you just sit there! One friend commented on how disconcerting it was. This habit probably is due to not knowing how to continue the conversation, or the person is searching for a topic to talk about and does not mean to be rude, but it gives you a chance to continue the conversation if you wish or to get up, say goodbye and leave!

CULTURE AND TRAVEL

CHAPTER 7

'Gentle smiles light up so much of Burmese life,
and no more so than at the age-old full moon
festivals held at pagodas up and down the country.'
—Peter Smart, *Lines from a Shining Land*

LEISURE

While earning a living seems to preoccupy most Myanmar during the current economic troubles, they still find time to relax, to entertain and be entertained. Watching TV, videos, VCDs and DVDs are popular choices for those who have the equipment but the Myanmar, being a literate people, also love to read. Material may vary from news digests to translations of the latest Jackie Collins novel but the vast majority of books and magazines will be borrowed because of the price and limited availability of any kind of literature in Myanmar.

More artistic pastimes like painting, sculpture and photography are increasing in popularity and have large followings of enthusiasts in the major towns. Many young artists hold exhibitions in Yangon and Mandalay, and photography competitions are regularly held, entries coming from all over the country.

As far as the ethnic arts and crafts are concerned, one should remember that for the majority of Myanmar these are hardly 'hobbies' but rather livelihoods that have been carried out by families for generations. The Myanmar would not choose such handicrafts as pottery, weaving and lacquer work as hobbies.

Sports

Of the spectator sports, the best-loved is soccer. Soccer matches are usually rowdy and often require police security.

Of course, soccer is also one of the most commonly played games in Myanmar as almost any ball will do and makeshift goal posts are easy to devise. Sports like golf and tennis are for the well-to-do as they are expensive to play.

December is usually designated the month for sports because it is cool then. Marathons, walkathons and other events in which lots of people can take part are organised in Yangon and the larger towns. Generally, older women are not sports-oriented and hotel gyms and aerobic classes are mostly frequented by the younger figure-conscious Myanmar women.

Myanmar's most famous traditional sport is *chinlone*. This is played with a cane ball by men (and now women) standing in a circle and trying to keep the ball in the air, using almost any part of the body except the hands. It is very entertaining to watch and play, and you can see it being played on the streets, in open spaces and even in office compounds after work.

Myanmar Boxing

The Myanmar also have their own style of boxing. If you go to watch a match, you may find this rather violent as the boxers are allowed to use any part of the body to fight with and the winner is the first participant to draw substantial quantities of blood. A boxer is allowed to wipe away blood three times before being declared the loser. However, it is a popular sport in Myanmar and famous boxers tour the towns, especially during the pagoda festivals. The matches are even given orchestral accompaniment!

Thaing is the traditional martial art. It is a form of self-defence practised generally by enthusiasts, although it has been popularised in the movies just like Chinese kung-fu. Sometimes *thaing* players use long swords called *dah*.

Chinese martial arts are very popular now as in other parts of the world; in Yangon and Mandalay there are many regular *tai chi*, *wu shu* and *qi gong* classes of different levels, complete with competitions and contests.

Music and Dancing

The Myanmar love to watch *pwe*, the dances and plays usually performed at festivals and celebrations. Most of these are performed in large bamboo-covered tents, with the audience sitting on the floor on mats (these are bought, just like seats at the cinema). Often the *pwe* start in the late evening and continue until the early hours of the morning. It is common for the audience to eat, drink, chat, smoke and doze off throughout the performance.

The plays are usually adaptations of the *Jataka*, a collection of stories about the Buddha's previous existences, especially as animals like the King of the Monkeys or the King of the Lions. The performers are troupes which have specialised in performance for generations. One of the most famous is the Shwe Mann Tin Maung Troupe, now in its third or fourth generation.

Sometimes the *pwe* are held in the open and it can get cold towards dawn. The older folk will tie towels around their heads and shoulders, like a shawl. Some are so addicted to these performances that they watch continuously for several nights and end up with red eyes from lack of sleep.

Musical performances are seldom held in their own right as they are in the West. The Myanmar seem to prefer combinations of dancing and singing, although concerts may be seen on TV. Performances include stage shows in which pop stars sing modern Myanmar songs, usually Western hits with Myanmar lyrics.

TRAVELLING INSIDE MYANMAR

If you are living in Myanmar for some time, you are likely to travel; Myanmar is a large country and there are a variety of scenic places to visit. However, many areas are out of bounds to foreigners and even the Myanmar themselves have never been to the further reaches and mountainous areas of their country due to the difficulty of travelling. The poor communications infrastructure means that travel is exhausting and uncomfortable, as well as time-consuming.

Some parts of the country are also quite dangerous to visit as there are wild animals, armed rebels from the ethnic

minorities and robbers (known as *dacoits*). However, things are slowly changing for visitors. Foreigners are now allowed to travel as far north as Lashio and this may be extended in the near future, following reports of plans to develop the area around Myitkyina. Development plans for tourist attractions in the far southern islands of the Myeik (Mergui) Archipelago were also recently reported in the newspapers.

WHY DO THE MYANMAR PEOPLE TRAVEL?

For the most part, Myanmar people travel to the more accessible places in the country to make pilgrimages to famous pagodas. They seldom travel for the sake of taking a relaxing holiday by the sea or in the countryside, as those in developed countries would. Most of their travelling is done during the dry or cool seasons which are off-peak for the agricultural year. It is also the time when the pagodas have their annual festivals known as *hpaya-pwe*.

The rest of the time, the travellers one is likely to meet on trains or buses are usually either students going back home during holidays or merchants on business trips.

As times are hard now for the common people, they are unable to travel much unless an emergency, such as the death or illness of a family member, requires personal attendance.

Ways Of Travelling

Tickets for air journeys are very hard to obtain. As for most goods, there is a black market in tickets and the price is many times that of the real fare. If they can be afforded, one then has to suffer the departure and arrival delays common in Myanmar. The situation is the same for rail travel and it is easier to travel by car or bus. Water transport is unsafe and nearly always uncomfortable due to severe crowding (carrying more passengers than is safe) and there are frequent capsizes and many deaths as the boats do not carry life jackets.

Places of historical interest or beauty do not seem to draw the Myanmar as much as significant Buddhist attractions such as relics or monks reputed to have mystical powers. They

seldom go sightseeing for its own sake, religious concerns seeming to be more important to them. Anyway, economic circumstances demand that travel has to be more than just for fun. One might as well aim to gain religious merit at the same time!

Thus, a wonder like Bagan, with its ancient architecture, paintings, murals and sculptures, has been more acclaimed by Westerners than the Myanmar. For most Myanmar, such beauty has little worth in its own right without religious significance. Thus many devotees have taken to restoring old ruined stupas in the Bagan area for merit causing concern to archaeologists and conservationists.

PLACES TO SEE

The well-travelled circuit for foreign visitors is Mandalay, Pyin-oo-lwin, Bagan, Taunggyi, Thandwei and Bago. These places are often described in the tourist and back-packer's guidebooks.

Less visited towns are Mawlamyine, Pyinmana, Toungoo, Pathein and Pyi, all of which are typical Myanmar towns but not as full of cultural interest as those mentioned above. However, it may be that you will visit these places for business purposes as they are centres with traditional crafts and marketable products.

Myanmar is a land of pagodas and within the towns they will be the most obvious sights. Many of them are centuries old. In Yangon, the Shwe Dagon on Singuttara Hill is the most sacred pagoda in Myanmar as it enshrines Buddha's hair and other sacred relics. Gold and precious gems adorn the pagoda and are buried in the main treasure chamber under the spire. The main platform and surrounding terraces provide interesting nooks and crannies and they are always full of worshippers making offerings, meditating and telling beads.

Also in Yangon, the National Museum, the smaller shrines and the many public monuments provide great photographic material. Other places of interest include the Zoological Gardens, the Aquarium, the Aung San Market, the Martyrs' Mausoleum and the two lakes, Inya and Royal Lake.

However, many consider Mandalay the true capital of Myanmar and feel that its atmosphere is also more Myanmar than Yangon's. Mandalay Hill offers a spectacular view of the city, its many pagodas and famous monasteries. The palace here has also been restored.

From Mandalay you can go to Innwa, Sagaing or Amarapura, all of which were once capitals in Myanmar's history. Alternatively, you could visit the cool hills of colonial Pyin-oo-lwin.

In Bago, about 80 km (50 miles) north of Yangon, there are some of the oldest ruins in Myanmar, as well as more pagodas. On the road to Bago you will have a chance to see the paddy fields and typical Myanmar villages. The War Cemetery is also on this road.

Bagan is usually on most visitors' lists. If you are going to see the beautiful art and architecture of the pagodas, be prepared for walks and climbs—you can climb some pagodas right to the top terraces.

Taunggyi, Kalaw and Inle Lake are usually combined in one visit, with a tour of the Pindaya caves thrown in. In summer these places are refreshingly cool but temperatures can reach freezing point in December and January. Inle Lake is famous for its boatsmen who row with their legs.

The terrace of the Shwe Dagon is always full of devotees. The Myanmar mostly go on religious pilgrimages rather than sight-seeing tours.

An untouched beach in the Mergui Archipelago. Many beaches in Myanmar are still undeveloped.

Thandwei beach in the Rakhine state and the newly developed Chaung Tha beach near Pathein are both clean and have modern facilities. Some of the wealthy Myanmar from Yangon and Mandalay have beach holidays here, but such holiday-makers are the exception to the rule in Myanmar. The Dawei area also has long stretches of beach but these remain undeveloped, the beach bungalows inhabited only by locals.

THINGS TO BUY

Shopping for products not available in one's hometown is of course an added bonus for Myanmar travellers.

When travelling in the Shan states it is mainly fruits that are brought home. Those that can't be carried at least can be eaten up on the way! Favourite fruits to buy here are strawberries, avocados, oranges and tangerines. A visit to a traditional Five Day Market in the Shan region is a particularly colourful sight as the local people, wearing their ethnic dress, will come to sell their wares. You may also discover some

interesting woven textiles, woollen shawls and thick *longyi* at such markets because of the colder climate here.

Mandalay offers a variety of good buys, especially from the Zegyo Market. These include leather goods like slippers and bags; woven fabrics made into *longyi* and shoulder bags; tapestries (called *kala gar*); pieces of bark for grinding into *thanaka*; and a whole variety of speciality foods. Gold leaf (gold beaten to paper-thinness) is also made in Mandalay. This is applied to Buddha images by devotees during worship.

Bagan is the place to buy quality lacquerware, while Pyi is famed for its custard apples and textiles similar to *ikat*. The Rakhine state offers seafood and thicker *longyi* that come in regional chain designs. Fruit preserves, coconut wafers and jaggery are specialities of the Taninthayi strip.

GIFTS FOR YOUR HOSTS

When you travel in Myanmar and want to choose gifts for friends you plan to visit or your host, it is always best to note which products are scarce in their area. The Myanmar themselves go by this rule. For example, where the town is located inland, gifts of dried fish, shrimp or other coastal or freshwater products are appreciated. This again applies with fruits, speciality foods, textiles and consumer goods. (See Chapter Five for more on gift-giving.)

WHERE TO STAY

Myanmar travellers usually stay with relatives, who are always expected to offer their hospitality, even if it's only in the form of a space to put one's bedroll. Monasteries are also open to overnight guests if the chief abbot or monk is requested. However, women can only stay in monasteries if they have accompanying menfolk and then only in designated buildings. Foreign guests may also be allowed to stay in the monasteries but should be careful to dress and behave appropriately. On leaving, a moderate donation should be offered.

Government civil servants on tour duty usually stay at circuit houses, used since colonial times. Most of these circuit

houses have a history of being haunted by ghosts. In fact, in one case, the ghost was asked to guard the house and is said to continue to do so!

Foreign guests can be sure of good accommodation since Myanmar hosts go out of their way to make everything as pleasant as possible. Similarly, for high-ranking government officials, guest houses suddenly have soap, towels and toilet paper, all of which were missing before. The wish to please is so great that the honoured guest will be offered articles the hosts themselves cannot afford for daily use.

Hotels are available in main sightseeing towns like Mandalay, Bagan and Taunggyi. By law, local people are forbidden to accommodate foreign visitors in their houses. Possibly this rule may be relaxed in the future, especially as tourism is being recognised as a means of earning precious foreign exchange. Even now, many small, privately-owned guest houses and inns are springing up in the larger cities. Service at such smaller family-owned budget hotels can be much better than the mediocre service found at large state-owned hotels. Yangon has a large number of these smaller hotels or inns which were originally the owners' houses; they can be found around the Golden Valley, Inya Road and Thanlwin Road areas.

PRE-TRAVEL PREPARATION

Before you travel, try to find out as much as possible about your destination, journey, the towns through which you will be travelling and the climate of the region. If you have hosts, it will also help to find out about them too, so that you can be sure of forms of address, what to expect, how to behave and so on.

Travel Necessities for the Myanmar

At the station, jetty or even the airport, you will see the local traveller's luggage. This usually includes his bedding: a light *kapok* mattress, a woven mat, a pillow, a light cotton blanket and mosquito net, all rolled up neatly and tied with a strong plastic rope.

Other luggage will include beverages in flasks or bottles, food in a carrier, various gifts for the hosts in return for his bed and meals, and a few clothes in an overnight bag.

Your Travel Kit

Whether you are entering Myanmar on a short visit or travelling within the country while living there, you should take with you the following things:

- Medicine such as aspirin, diarrhoea pills, calamine lotion, antihistamines if you are prone to allergies, malaria tablets and one course of antibiotics. Other drugs and injections such as insulin and disposable needles and syringes for diabetics and relevant emergency medication for asthmatics.
- Cotton wool and bandaids.
- Water purifying tablets.
- Cosmetics.
- Personal needs such as shampoo, toothpaste, soap and some soap powder or detergent for a small amount of laundry.
- Tissues, wet wipes and your own toilet rolls.
- Can-opener.
- Torch.
- Candles, lighter or matches.
- Swiss army knife.
- Clothing, including disposable underwear, sanitary towels or pads, socks (extra pairs if you cannot go around barefoot), warm clothes like sweaters or cardigans (see also Clothing below).
- Insect repellents like ointments, sprays and mosquito coils or insect killers.

Clothing

Clothing depends on which area you will be visiting. Yangon has a moderate climate and during the day it is warm. The coldest period is in December and January at night.

Long flared skirts and trousers are good for sightseeing, especially as sights are bound to include several pagodas where you may have to sit on mats to rest. For ladies, shorts and miniskirts are not advisable, nor is going around without

a bra. The Myanmar are modest and find this type of dressing offensive and shocking. A certain immorality is attached to one who dresses this way, the logic being that if you are not ashamed of exposing yourself you are capable of doing other things! Upper arms are also better covered, not just for modesty's sake but to avoid sunburn and insect bites.

Warm clothing is needed for hill areas like Pyin-oo-lwin, even though this place is close to Mandalay, which is one of the hottest regions in Myanmar. Taunggyi and Kalaw, which are on the Shan Plateau, are also popular hill resorts and require sweaters and woollens. Remember that in such places the locals use hot bricks to warm their beds and boil water if they want hot baths.

Mandalay is usually warm during the day, has soaring temperatures in summer and low temperatures at night during the cool season. So for a trip to Mandalay your wardrobe will depend on the season. Note, however, that Pyin-oo-lwin, which is close to Mandalay, is cool in the summer and has very low temperatures in the cool season.

The Big 'Shoe Question'

Shoes will have to be removed every time you enter a temple so it is best to wear ones that are without laces or can be easily removed and put on again. Sandals will be comfortable and practical but trainers or hiking boots with a lot of laces may not be so convenient when sightseeing in the towns. They are more suitable for a long journey and for walking in areas like Bagan, where one must climb up pagodas and walk among thorny shrubbery.

The big 'shoe question' concerning the need to remove shoes is a difficult and sensitive subject. In the past, it was even considered a sufficient reason to start a war: King Narathihapate executed the Mongol diplomatic mission when they did not remove their shoes for a royal audience! Similarly, a British missionary craving a royal audience with King Bodawpaya was refused when he entered the royal palace wearing his shoes.

The custom of having to remove shoes is one that does irk, not just for the discomfort but for the doubtful cleanliness of

most surfaces. Local signs saying 'Footwearing Prohibited' may bring smiles to most visitors' faces but they should also be obeyed.

In the neighbouring country of Thailand, shoes can be worn on the terraces of pagodas and must be removed only inside the pavilions and shrines. In Myanmar, however, one has to leave footwear at the very entrance to pagoda and monastery grounds. You, therefore, have to climb the stairs and walk around the pagoda terraces barefoot.

In the case of a very large pagoda, such as the Shwe Dagon, the terraces are kept clean by voluntary cleaning associations, but you may still tread on pigeon droppings, puddles and miscellaneous litter. The safest thing is to wear socks. Failing that, be sure to wash your feet with hot water and soap as soon as you get back to your hotel or home.

FESTIVALS

The Myanmar people have a festival for every month in their 12-month lunar calendar. (Refer to 'Calendar of Festivals and Holidays' on page 177)

Water Festival

The water festival in April lasts three to five days, although this can be extended to a week if the holiday falls over a weekend. The water festival welcomes in the Myanmar New Year. Business slows down or practically stops at this time of year, so it is not a good idea to plan business trips then.

This festival (similar to Songkran in Thailand) is eagerly awaited by young people and children. For teenagers, especially, it is a time to see and be seen, to mix with people their own age in a holiday environment. Known as *Thin gyan* or *Tha gyan* (*gy* is equivalent to "j"), festival preparations begin several months in advance. Songs, dances and skits are rehearsed and stages designed or set up.

But, of course, the focus of the whole festival is water. Symbolically, the sprinkling of water washes away the sins and bad luck of the old year in preparation for the new, although in reality the practice becomes an excuse for endless practical jokes where whole barrels or even hose pipes of water are directed at friends, relatives and anyone else who gets in the way.

Special marquees called *pandal* (derived from the Tamil word *pendel*) are set up on roadsides, along with stages for dances and songs. The *pandal* may belong to each quarter of the town, to a group of friends, families or associations, or to government departments or companies who collect the money and organise the whole show. Rows of water barrels line the front of the *pandal* and girls take turns to throw water at truck-loads of people driving from one *pandal* to another just for the purpose of getting soaked.

The water festival may thus be experienced either as one of the assailants throwing water from one of the *pandal* or as part of the group of targets in the vehicles. It is all great fun and no one is supposed to get angry, even when a complete stranger shouts insults at you on the street or drenches you while passing by. Lots of teasing goes on, some of which may end in fights, especially as many young people get well and truly drunk, thus having less control over what they do and say.

A 'giraffe woman' of the Padaung ethnic group. Padaung girls are allowed from about age 6 to choose if they wish to don the rings.

Rubies from Mogok displayed on a leaf. Their intense colour known as pigeon blood-red gives them a huge premium over other rubies. Mogok was for centuries the main source of the world's rubies.

Novice monks in Mandalay. Myanmar boys undergo a ceremony known as 'shinbyu', where they enter a monastery for a period of time, ranging from a few days to a week or more. Girls undergo an ear-piercing ceremony or become nuns for a short while.

Mohinga, Myanmar's national dish, comprises a dish of rice noodles in a spicy fish soup; garnishes include coriander, sliced boiled eggs, fried garlic, sliced shallots, red chilli flakes and limes.

Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi outside her home in Yangon, Myanmar. She is the daughter of national hero and founding father of modern Myanmar, General Aung San, as well as the leader of the National League for Democracy political party.

Accidents are quite common and, as a participant, one should not only be careful of getting hurt from very rough water throwing but should be wary of pickpockets in the crowd. A watchful eye should especially be kept on children and eyes and ears should be well covered with thick towels to avoid injury. Eardrums have been known to be pierced by water being sprayed at high pressure. Drivers must also be aware of the danger caused by wet streets, as traffic accidents are common at this time.

Older people will rarely participate in these vigorous activities and generally prefer to stay at home or keep the Eight Precepts (see Glossary) by visiting monasteries or meditation centres. Others may go away for a long holiday, having seen enough of water festivals over the years.

Visitors to Myanmar, however, should really experience the fun of this colourful festival at least once. The diplomatic corps are usually treated to a special water festival celebration arranged by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which comes complete with dances, food and visits to town for water throwing.

What To Wear

It is best to wear thick clothes, preferably denim shirts and jeans which take the sting away from the splashes of water, commonly thrown out of small condensed milk tins. Do not wear white or thin materials, or colours that will run, as every item of clothing is sure to cling to you the wetter you get. Myanmar girls are often seen walking home sopping wet with the hem of their sarong in tatters. Unfortunately, at this time of year traditional ladies' wear is not as comfortable or convenient as it usually is: try walking in a completely wet sarong—it's just like having a wet bandage wrapped around your legs. At least the men can wear trousers, but most of the women still prefer traditional dress.

If you intend actively participating in the festival it's a good idea to take a change of clothing and underwear in a waterproof bag, along with an extra towel. Water throwers try to get rid of grievances and aggression at this time and their aim can be quite indiscriminate.

Kasone Banyan-Watering

It was on the full moon day of Kasone (April-May) that the Buddha was born, attained Enlightenment and finally passed away. His Enlightenment occurred as he sat under a banyan tree and thus, one will find such trees planted in almost every pagoda and monastery in Myanmar. The tree is sacred among Buddhists and banyan tree-watering ceremonies are conducted.

Such a watering ceremony can be seen at the Shwe Dagon, the Sule and other pagodas and monasteries. Young girls will carry earthen water pots filled with water and take turns to water the banyan tree, the base of which is often enclosed in a decorative concrete structure.

Waso Robe-Offering

The day of the full moon in the month of Waso (June-July) marks the beginning of Lent, which spans the three months of the rainy season. It commemorates the preaching of Buddha's first sermon, 49 days after his Enlightenment.

Buddhists observe this day by keeping the Eight Precepts. Monks will be offered meals by disciples and sermons are delivered. A robe-offering ceremony is also performed not later than the full-moon day of Waso as, after this day, the monks are forbidden to travel and are required to spend Lent in the monasteries. The robes are offered to them for use during this period of retreat.

Festival of Lights (Thadingyut)

This festival is held at the end of Lent on the full moon day of Thadingyut (September-October). It celebrates the descent of the Buddha from heaven after he preached the *Abidhamma* (the most difficult of Buddhist teachings) to his mother who was reborn in heaven.

On or around the festival day, it is a custom to pay respects to elders by offering presents of fruit, cake or *longyi* (lengths of cloth worn as sarongs). Elders include grandparents, uncles, aunts, teachers, doctors, professors and lecturers.

Every house is lit up at night, either with strings of electric lights, candles or paper lanterns. Electricity being rather unpredictable, most families now just use candles and even then just a token few are lighted as candles are also rather expensive.

The lights all over the towns look lovely and government offices often try to outdo each other in designing the decorations. Various streets in the major towns are also lit up and closed off to traffic. Food and handicraft stalls are lined up on the roadsides and shows of dancing and drama (known as *pwes*) are staged at one end of the main street.

If you are going to look at or join in the festivities, beware of pickpockets who are always rife at festival times in Myanmar. Try not to take your passport and valuables with you as the streets become very crowded. It is good to go along with some local friends who are aware of the dangers.

Kahtein Robe-Offering

The Kahtein robe-offering is performed during the month of Tazaungmone (October-November). Robes and other articles are offered to monks and feasts are held.

A second festival of lights, Tazaungdaing, is celebrated at this time, about a month after the first. It is very similar to the first festival except that different parts of the towns and cities may be lit up.

During this festival, the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Yangon has an all-night robe-weaving contest. The robes must be finished by dawn when they are offered to the Buddha images in the pagoda. Similar robe-weaving contests take place around the country but this is the most famous. Large crowds are attracted to the spectacle and, as there are usually not enough security people around, you should keep an eye on your valuables.

At this time. practical jokes are frequently played on neighbours and family: moving the flower pots or washing line about and hiding things are common jokes.

Hta-ma-ne Festival (Tabodwei Full Moon)

This festival celebrates a good harvest, although the name actually comes from the food traditionally eaten at this time (January-February).

Hta-ma-ne is a savoury concoction made of glutinous rice cooked with groundnuts, coconut shreds, sesame oil, ginger and garlic. Grown men are usually needed to make the mixture as it is very thick and hard to stir. They make it in huge pans over open fires in gardens or monasteries. Because of the quantity they are often seen stirring it with what look like paddles or oars. Later, packets of the gooey *hta-ma-ne*, wrapped in banana leaves, are distributed to neighbours.

Monasteries also prepare *hta-ma-ne* with the chief abbot supervising and then distributing the packets to disciples.

Pagoda Festivals (Hpaya Pwe)

Being a land of pagodas, all the important ones in the land have their own festival days, which fall on various full moon days of the Myanmar calendar.

The most famous, the Shwe Dagon in Yangon, celebrates its festival in the month of Tabaung which falls in February or March. The festival is held in the grounds of the pagoda at the foot of the hill on which it stands. Many stalls are set

up here, selling food, handicraft, textiles and other local products. Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds are there for the children. Large structures made of bamboo are erected where songs, dances and plays, usually from the *Jataka* (stories of Buddha's life), are performed by famous dance troupes. In the provinces, villagers from all around will come to spend the night to watch the shows and eat their favourite delicacies, going home in their bullock carts only in the morning.

If you are intending to visit one of these festivals, you should be warned that there is a real fire hazard because of the unmanaged crowds and the flammable nature of most of the structures erected for the celebrations.

Ethnic Festivals

Each of the ethnic groups in Myanmar has its own festivals, the most famous of which are the Kayin New Year, Kachin Manao Festival and Pao Rocket-Firing Festivals. However, it may be difficult for the visitor to get to see them as even locals from the valleys find it hard to reach the mountain areas.

The Kayin New Year is a national holiday and is celebrated by the Kayin with dances and songs. Dances are performed by groups and rehearsals start months earlier. The Kayin dress in their ethnic costume of tunics (usually red with colourful stripes) and beautiful woven *longyi*. The women tie coloured scarves in their hair. If you live in Yangon, there are dances at Insein, a suburb in northwest Yangon where the Kayin communities are concentrated. The Kayin state capital, Pa'an, holds the grandest celebrations at this time.

Among the festivals being revived by the current government is the ancient Boat Festival which is celebrated on the Royal Lake and has traditional boats being rowed by boatsmen in traditional costume. Another is the Equestrian Festival, featuring shows of military skills on horseback.

Nat Pwe

While the Myanmar are Buddhists, many still cling to their older animistic roots. This takes the form of worshipping spirits, called *nat*, to whom prayers and offerings are made at a small shrine in the home. Such spirit worship is prevalent in the northern regions and among the many ethnic groups.

Taungbyon, about 21 km (13 miles) north of Mandalay, is the location of the Taungbyon Nat Pwe (or Spirit Festival), the most famous animist celebration. This takes place in August when train-loads of worshippers arrive to pray to the powerful spirits of the two Taungbyon brothers who were executed by the king in the 11th century.

Myanmar *nat* worshippers may pray to some or the entire pantheon of 37 *nat*, most of whom died violent deaths before becoming spirits. Worship is generally based on fear of being harmed or punished by the *nat*, and the hope that favours will be bestowed in return for prayers.

Nat pwe can also be seen in Yangon, where crowds of people may gather inside bamboo *pandals* for music and dancing. There are special songs for the *nat* and mediums may become possessed by the spirits to dance or talk.

Christmas

Christmas in Myanmar is celebrated by Christians just as it is in other parts of the world, with church services, carol singing, small parties and gift-giving. The ethnic groups have prominent Christian communities and there are also Myanmar Christians. Carol singing is especially popular among the very musical Kayin groups.

Incidentally, those who expect a longish holiday season from Christmas to New Year should be warned that there isn't one in Myanmar. New Year's Day is not a public holiday.

CALENDAR OF FESTIVALS AND HOLIDAYS

The Myanmar people have a festival for every month in their calendar. This calendar traditionally consists of 12 lunar months. As lunar months differ from solar months in the number of days, an extra month, known as a 'second Waso month' is added every few years, a bit like a leap year. The Myanmar year 1369 begins in April 2007 and ends in mid-April 2008. However, for religious matters the Myanmar people use the Buddhist calendar. This is also the lunar calendar, but the calculations begin from the year of Buddha's Enlightenment. Thus, 2007 is 2550–2551 according to the Buddhist Calendar.

Festival	Myanmar Month	English Month
Water Festival	Tagu	March–April
Kasone Banyan-Watering	Kasone	April–May
*Sar-pyan-pwe**	Nayone	May–June
Waso Robe-Offering	Waso	June–July
*Sar-yay-dan-me-pwe**	Wagaung	July–August
Boat Festival	Tawthalin	August–September
Festival of Lights	Thadingyut	September–October

Kahtein Robe-Offering	Tazaungmone	October–November
*Sar-hso-daw-pwe**	Nadaw	November–December
Equestrian Festival	Pyatho	December–January
Hta-ma-ne Festival	Tabodwei	January–February
Sand Pagoda Festival	Tabaung	February–March

**Sar-pyan-pwe* is the time when monks take their examinations in the Buddhist scriptures. *Sar-yay-dan-me-pwe* is a festival in which lots are drawn for a Buddha image prize. *Sar-hso-daw-pwe* celebrates the poets and literary figures of Myanmar.

Holidays

Myanmar has a considerable number of holidays to celebrate festivals and to commemorate heroes and national events.

Holidays

Jan 4	Independence Day, when independence from the British was attained.
Feb 12	Union Day, when the Panglong Agreement of 1947 was signed between Myanmar leaders and those of the major ethnic groups, aiming towards a Union of Burma.
Mar 2	Originally the day of the 1962 coup d'etat by the Revolutionary Council, now celebrated as Peasants Day.
Mar 27	Tatmadaw Day (Armed Forces Day, formerly known as Resistance Day); celebrates the day when the Burma Independence Army (BIA) marched against the Japanese.
April	Water Festival, usually three or four days.
May 1	Workers' Day (Myanmar equivalent of Labour Day).
May	Kasone Banyan-Watering Festival.

(*Continued on the next page*)

(*Continued from the previous page*)

Jul 19	Martyrs' Day; when Aung San and other cabinet ministers were assassinated.
Dec	National Day; this falls on the tenth waning moon day of Tazaungmone.
Dec/Jan	Kayin New Year; this falls on the first waxing moon day of Pyatho.
Dec 25	Christmas.

In addition to the above, the Hindu Deepavali and Muslim Eid (marking the end of Ramadan fasting) are also holidays.

Because of the number of public holidays, it is not a custom to extend the holiday to Monday should it fall on a Sunday. (Government departments are closed on Saturdays and Sundays.)

COMMUNICATING IN MYANMAR

CHAPTER 8

'I remember a day [in 1945] in the monsoon near Letpanthonbin, east of Waw, in a hut with three other soldiers, and a man nursing a sick child who was moaning and would not be comforted. The nearest doctor was five miles away ... we had no medical supplies ... and for a common language, only a few phrases from an (British) Army booklet. "*Gowng kaik day*?"(headache) I asked. "*Baik na day*?"(stomach ache) ... with all his anxiety he responded with a smile, and that ... has stayed in my mind.'
—Dr Glyn Court, *Lines from a Shining Land*

LANGUAGE

In Myanmar, the official language is the Myanmar language. It is used in most offices but sometimes forms and receipts are still in English. Often they are the same as those used since the 1950s. Signs on shops are usually in both Myanmar and English.

English and Anglicisation

Most Myanmar can understand English, although they may not use it very fluently. Having been an English colony for a long time, lots of older Myanmar will intersperse English words and phrases in their speech. Many English words, such as 'car', 'bus', 'telephone', 'television', 'doctor' and 'film', have become part of the Myanmar language. This is because Myanmar requires a long string of descriptive words, whereas English is more concise. For example, the word 'diary' in Myanmar is literally translated as 'daily record', 'dentist' is a 'doctor concerned with teeth' and 'TV' is "a picture seen and sound heard". This makes the translated word very long and more like a definition.

English was once taught from kindergarten through to university level. Then in the 1960s, there was a switch to Myanmar as the medium of instruction and English was taught only from the fifth standard when children reached 11 or 12 years of age. The result of this policy was that proficiency in the Myanmar language was very high while

standards of English were very low. It was then that Myanmar educational institutions lost their former international standing. However, since the late 1980s, English has once again been taught from kindergarten level.

Nevertheless, a whole generation of Myanmar children has grown up without having learnt much English. This very inadequacy has led to a remarkable interest in learning the language, as can be seen from newspaper advertisements for English conversation and tuition classes. English-Myanmar dictionaries, phrase books and glossaries are also very popular but are heftily priced.

Younger people are very eager to speak English and will love to practise on you if they can. With them, there is none of the feeling of using the 'language of a slave colony' which English was generally thought to be by the older generation. The young consider it the language of business and of the world, and realise its importance in international dealings. They do not care so much about speaking with the correct English accent that those who lived through colonial times were so conscious of. The latter, in fact, would be very likely to sneer at mispronunciation and there are still a number of such people who feel they have to speak with an English accent to show their 'class'. In the same way, those who speak English with a broad local accent are said to have a *nga-pi* accent, meaning literally a 'fish paste accent'. Fish paste is a staple of the Myanmar diet and has a very strong smell, so the term is entirely derogatory.

Stresses

Stresses are the biggest problem for the Myanmar when speaking English. For example, many will pronounce 'vegetables' with stress on 'tables'. People tend to say "deter-mYne" and "ana-lY-sis". A common pronunciation of "boy" is "bwy" and "oil" sounds a bit like "wine". The "er" sound is pronounced with an open "ah", so "Burmese" is usually "Barmese", "fur" is "far" and so on. Moreover, the letters F, V, Q and X do not have equivalent sounds in Myanmar. Thus the word "film" is pronounced "hpalin", "TV" sounds more like "TB" and "cubes" like "tubes". Long and short

vowels also sound about the same, for example there is no difference between "pool" and "pull".

Some English words have been rendered into Myanmar sounds and when they are put back into English become something else entirely. For example, the typical shirt worn by Myanmar men has a collar that is upright, rather like a Chinese collar. This is called a "stiff collar", but with a Myanmar accent it sounds something like "sa tit-kawla". When rendered back into English many consequently write it as "stick collar"!

Myanmar Language

The Myanmar language is monosyllabic and a single sound can mean entirely different things depending on the context. Thus, one can use the language in many ways to make insults or innuendos and still get away with it by saying that the meaning was misconstrued.

The people characteristically spend a lot of time interpreting speeches and things that others have said to them. In fact, this pastime has become obsessive with some, so that even a simple question like, "Is so-and-so still working in this organisation?" can be interpreted as meaning, "This person should not be working here anymore," a suggestion which could result in his transfer to another job!

Old Myanmar has a flowery style, while modern Myanmar is more to the point. Since the socialist period the language has become loaded with political expressions and slogans, as can be seen from a quick glance at newspapers. (For business language, turn to Chapter Nine.)

Will I Need to Learn the Myanmar Language?

The visitor does not need to learn to speak Myanmar to get by in the country as most understand basic English. Learning Myanmar can be a tricky business as the different tones are hard to master.

Myanmar language can be studied at the University of Foreign Languages on University Avenue in Yangon and also with individual private tutors, some of whom may be retired staff of universities' Department of Myanmar Language

or school teachers trying to supplement their income. Your Myanmar friends may teach you basic Myanmar to help you get around, such as greetings, simple questions and answers and the number system. (Refer to 'Myanspeak' on page 218.)

Phrases and short sentences may be memorised for social purposes but mastering the tones will take some time. You can practise on your domestic staff.

At first, the writing will look very confusing because the round shapes seem to have little variation. For example the letter *nga* looks like the letter C, while the number one looks like a reversed C with the opening on the left. Zero and the letter *wa* are represented by the same character, O.

A Mischievious Prank

Be careful that, for a joke, some people don't teach you swear words, telling you that the phrase means 'good morning' or 'thank you'. A Chinese friend learnt the greeting *nwa gyi*, thinking that he was saying "hello". In fact he was calling out, "Big cow"!

"Yes" can mean "No"

Because a negative answer involves a loss of face for the parties concerned, the usual answer to any question will be "yes". You will have to consider the meaning of any 'yes' with some care as it can really mean 'no'. This process is very annoying for Westerners who are usually used to more direct methods of communication.

Even when speaking English, 'yes' will be the usual answer to a question using a negative form. You have to learn to be patient and not take every 'yes' at its face value.

BODY LANGUAGE

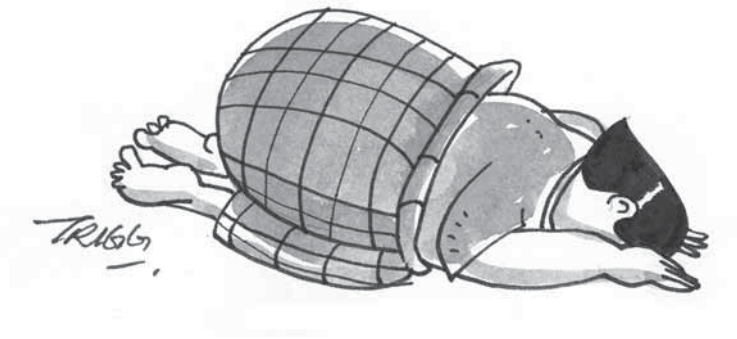
In Myanmar, the most acceptable body language seems to be one of self-effacement, modesty and self-control. Loud, boastful behaviour is frowned upon.

Public shows of affection are also uncommon. At one time it was even taboo for a woman to be seen out in public with a man who was not her husband. Even now

it is not common to see couples walking hand-in-hand or embracing in streets. However, girls and women will frequently be seen holding hands and linking arms in public.

Respect to elders is always heavily stressed in traditional families and this is reflected through body language. Young girls and boys are taught to walk lightly and not stamp around when they walk near grandparents and other elders. They are also expected to run errands for them, such as getting their spectacles, grinding *thanaka* on the grinding stone for grandma to use after her bath (see Chapter Three) getting water for grandfather and so on.

Obedience is required more than anything else. Talking back and being rebellious are rarely tolerated. Young boys and girls must bow slightly when they walk past elders and they must never sit on a level which is above their elders' heads. When handing objects to them they should use the right hand, supported by the left hand at the elbow. One should also never pass objects over superiors' heads.



At night it is usual to pay respects to grandparents and parents by doing the gesture of obeisance known as *kadawt*. It is sometimes called the kow tow, although this has a meaning of obsequiousness attached to it. In this gesture the children kneel on the floor in front of seated elders and bow to the ground with their hands held in front of the chest, palms together. This gesture is used to offer thanks, to show respect and to ask forgiveness for any inadvertent disrespect they may have shown.

This same gesture is used when praying and when greeting or offering things to monks. It is also included in special school ceremonies, usually held before exams or at the end of term, to thank and pay respect to teachers.

Slapping the face is the biggest insult to the Myanmar. Perhaps this is why the Japanese were not easily forgiven for their habit of slapping the faces of local people during their occupation. Similarly, the Myanmar cannot understand how the Japanese could slap their children's faces when disciplining them.

Sitting

Myanmar people are used to sitting cross-legged on the floor. They find sitting on Western-style upright chairs mostly tiring and uncomfortable and soon end up putting their legs up on the chair, either folding both legs or one folded and the other bent so they can put their chin on the knee.

Lefthandedness

In earlier times, lefthandedness was discouraged and "southpaws" were forced to use the right hand for eating and writing. The left hand is only used for cleaning the backside after a visit to the toilet, so it is not used to pass objects to others, especially to elders, honoured guests or monks and nuns.

Nowadays, lefthanded children do not have such a hard time, although they may invite comment whenever they eat or write.

Smiles

The Myanmar people are always smiling; little short laughs are added to every sentence, especially when they feel shy or embarrassed or are uncertain about how to react in difficult situations. Even on sad occasions they may still smile and laugh. This is because they do not wish to inflict their grief upon you or make a nuisance of themselves if they can help it. They will be self-controlled and will remain the gracious host should you call on them during a bereavement.

In situations involving foreigners, they may be particularly uncertain of themselves as they are generally not used to dealing with outsiders. Because they cannot articulate feelings and thoughts effectively, they may just fill up the spaces in time with smiles. Particularly if they feel their English is not good enough, they will be silent but smiling. Smiles can mean that the person is embarrassed, angry, sad or feeling very *ah-nar-de*. Often they can simply mean "hello". Smiles can be bright, rueful, bitter or shy, and one should learn how to differentiate between them.

A Smile To Convey A Thousand Words

A smile may convey a greeting or a consent, or it may express an emotion like amusement, embarrassment, shyness, sarcasm, or anger. A Myanmar doctor studying in England would smile every time he met his professor in passing. It was meant as a greeting, but one day the professor stopped him and asked, "Am I very funny?"

DOING BUSINESS

CHAPTER 9

Myanmar is a large country physically, but a small country if you ever do anything to tarnish your reputation. Stories and gossip spread like wild fire ... It is important for an international businessman to keep the appearance of propriety.
—H.C.Matthew Sim, *Myanmar on my Mind*

As with other Asian cultures, communication in Myanmar is oblique or indirect. There is emphasis on who is friendly with whom and how well. When a favour is received, it is important that it be returned when the occasion or a specific request arises. Those on the receiving end are indebted to their benefactors, the more so if it was an important favour. As an example, let's say one friend has helped another to get his child into an exclusive school by putting in a word with the principal. Later on, that person may ask the favour to be returned, especially as his was a significant one.

In business relationships, these customs are extended. Favours received, however small, must be returned.

Where a person requires an introduction to another, it is the custom to seek someone who is a mutual friend and can be the intermediary. This intermediary himself will probably be someone who owes a favour to one of the parties involved.

The first meeting may not be strictly business. It may be more for the purpose of assessing each other's strengths and weaknesses, and generally getting a 'feel' for your new acquaintance's personality. At the first meeting, anything apart from business may be covered!

Sometimes even astrological calculations are made to discover whether you are the 'right' person with whom to have a business partnership.

Importance Of Relationships

Myanmar business culture is full of networks and it is very important for social relationships to be maintained and kept smooth at all times. Because family relationships are so extended (even the brother of one's sister-in-law would be considered 'family', as would the grandson of one's best friend) almost everyone is related by blood or marriage. Thus, the Myanmar can always find someone with the connections required for their purposes. No actual business deal may come about for quite some time but the point is that the connection has been made. One has to be flexible and open to opportunity.

Social relationships are frequently placed before business relationships and business success can rest on the bonds of trust derived from social interaction. In Myanmar, it is hard for business relationships to stand alone and you have to make a special effort to be accepted as a person as well as a businessman. The concept of 'face' goes hand-in-hand with business relationships. The Myanmar do not like to get into situations where refusal will involve a loss of face.

A BRIEF ECONOMIC HISTORY

In the 1990s, Myanmar opened its economy after more than 30 years of isolation and attempts at self-sufficiency. During those years, a socialist economy was in existence, complete with planned targets for every product and service, price controls and bureaucratic managerial procedures.

However, back in 1948, when independence from the British was gained, Myanmar had its share of Indian and Chinese entrepreneurs, as well as a fledgling group of Myanmar businessmen. By the 1960s, the industrial sector of the economy was a reasonable size and many consumer products of fair quality were being produced.

The nationalisation of businesses and banks after the coup d'etat of 1962 slowly ran these enterprises into the ground, mainly due to inexperienced and indifferent managerial staff. So, by the 1970s there was a dire lack of consumer goods of every kind. Attempts were made to change things

by introducing some accountability for profit but, by then, the whole system was too entrenched. There were also chaotic and frequent changes in organisations and managerial levels, as well as a negative incentive system where any mistake could result in the loss of jobs. For most employees, it was far safer to carry on with unproductive and inefficient routines than do anything that would rock the boat. Initiative was not rewarded and was not part of a manager's requirements.

The pilferage and waste were also appalling. The general excuse everyone gave was that they had to survive somehow. 'Survival' indeed justified everything from accepting bribes to stealing state property: stationery, spare parts, raw materials, fans and electrical equipment all went missing from government-owned buildings.

In these years, the most lucrative private business became trading in the black market, handling every consumer product that could not be sufficiently produced by the state-owned factories. The black market was never a clandestine market and virtually anyone who had something to sell joined the bandwagon. In fact, the black market allowed people to survive in the face of an inefficient government distribution system which rationed everything from matchboxes and spools of thread to rice and oil. Most government shops consisted of empty shelves and indifferent sales staff with vacant stares. Some couldn't even be bothered to answer a customer's questions.

Success Of The Private Enterprise

In 1987, in the midst of a socialist economy, black market turnover was estimated at US$ 1.5 billion, between a quarter and a half of the country's Gross Domestic Product!

During the years of rationing under the socialist system, the need to survive became the mother of recycling in Myanmar. The ethic, still in existence today, is that everything can be repaired and used once more. Nobody throws anything away; a broken umbrella can always be mended or a pair of slippers resoled or stitched up.

A look at the pre-war cars still being driven around and the types of spare parts which are being produced on local lathe machines should convince anyone of the ingenuity Myanmar people have to make the best out of a difficult situation. That's how they have survived for years on an outdated technological base.

The amount of waste generated by developed countries seems appalling to the Myanmar, especially when in some societies whole sets of furniture, mattresses, blankets and pillows are thrown away in preparation for the New Year. In Myanmar, even the well-to-do will have old-fashioned furniture, simply because it's still of good quality.

Hyperinflation has meant that even wealthy families have had to skimp on the yearly painting of the house, the upkeep of gardens and other luxuries previously afforded, as basic meals take up large portions of the month's budget. For the poor, three meals a day are now likely to be only one, with lots of rice gruel in between.

Myanmar's economy, while ostensibly an open one, still has a lot of controls by the government so that the private sector is still required to follow orders. Many economic reforms are needed still to make it function properly. Also, the economic sanctions by the West have limited the amount of foreign investment coming in to the country.

The gap between the rich and poor has become wider and wider as allegedly, large amounts of drug money have entered the economy to be laundered, and cronyism and corruption are rampant so that for any enterprise to be set up one needs many connections.

LEGAL ASPECTS OF BUSINESS

To date, some business laws have been passed but it would seem that these are lagging behind the economic changes that are taking place. Consequently, foreign businessmen may not feel adequately protected by the law.

Since the pro-democracy demonstrations and the coup of 1988, the chief business law passed has been the Investment Law of Myanmar (November 1988). This

allowed liberal foreign investments and was coupled with the removal of restrictions on private sector participation in domestic and foreign trade.

Other laws take the form of directives and orders from the government. The main obstacle to smooth business transactions seems to be the frequent changes in these directives.

The growth rate of the economy is usually reported to be double digit figures but is estimated by international organisations such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to be about four to five per cent annually.

BANKING AND FINANCE

An outdated banking system is slowly being modernised. Everything being done manually is most inefficient in terms of time and money, as well as being truly exasperating for anyone who has to deal with banks regularly; even the locals get fed up with the difficulty of withdrawing their own money.

Under the socialist system, the objective of the banks was to monitor each person's bank account and plan the total amount. The demonetisation of currency, reducing cash balances to nothing overnight, has meant that confidence in the currency and banking is very low. This confidence is unlikely to be restored in the face of a banking system which is based on bureaucratic control rather than commercial concerns.

Because it was, and still is, so hard to withdraw money, even from one's own account, the usual practice has been to keep cash at home or, in the case of businesses, to keep it literally in jute sacks lined up along the walls of the house!

Current inflation means that transactions involving huge amounts of money have to be carried out. Fresh-from-the-bank bundles of money can also be missing a note or two, requiring trusted helpers to count the stacks of currency. At least the printing of larger denominations would alleviate the problem. Denominations such as the K 45 and K 90 notes, which were issued probably for astrological reasons in the late 1980s, made counting extremely difficult (these notes are not in circulation any more).

The importance of owning foreign exchange cannot be over-emphasized in such a closed economy as Myanmar's. The rate of exchange has been arbitrarily kept at a level many times higher than the real rate, despite advice from many quarters that the currency should be devalued to bring it closer to its real worth.

A run on some private banks (which were alleged to be connected to drug money laundering) in 2003, plus the withdrawing or closing of branches of foreign banks due to inconducive conditions means that the banking system is still not properly established.

The state banks continue with their manual systems but local private banks have computerised some of their operations.

MYANMAR WORKERS AND THE WORK ETHIC

The work ethic of the socialist system was one that emphasized party membership and activities more than anything else. Work would be abandoned for the sake of party meetings, workers' meetings and rallies. The promotions system also gave great weight to membership so that expertise and experience did not count for much.

State-owned organisations are still burdened by a large number of employees who are not as productive as they could be. Inefficiency is encouraged by the practice of not being able to fire workers, unless perhaps for political reasons. Attempts at privatisation of some state enterprises has not been very successful

With the reinstatement of private enterprise it is becoming more evident that, where rewards are real and tangible, workers can be motivated to increase productivity. Direct monetary rewards work much better than vague titles like 'Worker of the Year'.

A foreign employer can expect willingness to learn and to adapt to new things. Loyalty to the company and the idea of keeping company secrets confidential can also be expected, although you may need to make sure this is explicitly understood at all levels.

Working hours are from 9 am to 4:30 pm, with government offices at least closed on weekends. Public holidays are listed on page 178.

Leisure Over Wealth

In 1960 an Australian agronomist came to the Irrawaddy Delta where the best rice in the world grew.. He brought the benefits of the Green Revolution—new strains of rice, new methods of crop rotation. The villagers were delighted and eagerly adopted all the new methods.

A year later he went back to see the results of his labours. He found that indeed they had doubled the yield … But instead of doubling their production they had halved the acreage, securing the same amount of rice for half the work. They value leisure more than wealth. They were grateful to have more time to sit under a palm tree discussing the universe…

—Sir Nicholas Fenn, *Lines from a Shining Land*

The Need To Be Businesslike

For the typical Myanmar, being businesslike is hard to differentiate from being mercenary. In traditional society, talking about money is regarded as tasteless, especially where favours are concerned. Payment for every single service and item is not understood and because of this people give (and get) a good deal of things for free. For example, doctors in the family would look after relatives and neighbours for free but these favours are returned in the form of food and gifts. The Myanmar get a shock to find they have to pay for a drink of water abroad, when plain tea is provided free at most food stalls in Myanmar. A friend on a brief study period in the West was disgusted when a room-mate paid ten cents after making a call from his phone!

In many state-owned factories it is, and was, the custom to give products away to those with whom one wishes to curry favour. Such ‘donations’ eat away at sales and profits, and no private enterprise would do it without adequate justification. Habits like these are pretty much entrenched and it is customary among Myanmar to still expect many things for free. Attempts at accounting for every office item used brings on complaints, especially about little things like paper clips and pins: “Oh, but they are so small, surely

they can be given for free?" To some extent it's almost like a modern monetary economy has not yet fully developed in Myanmar. Foreign employers will probably need to set down strict rules about 'freebies', making clear what can or cannot be taken or given away.

Management and Supervisory Staff

Choosing local supervisory staff for your company has several advantages: they will know more about handling local workers and dealing with cultural differences. Consequently, they can achieve harmony in the work place.

Although many young people are graduates, there is a lot of difference between choosing trained and raw graduates. It is possible to mould raw graduates to the company's requirements, while trained graduates have the obvious advantage of experience.

In making promotions, one should be careful to take into consideration the compatibility of local staff and the cultural perceptions of status and rank. For example, an employee who considers himself to be above another in social status, either because of education, birth or age, may be resentful of working under a person whom he considers his inferior. You will need to develop great tact when confronting the Myanmar social hierarchy, complete with its perceptions of 'face'.

Qualifications

The education system in Myanmar has been sadly deteriorating for years now. The general attitude has been for the state to be concerned with preventing student unrest at all costs. Nationalistic objectives have meant that every subject has been taught in the national language and, coupled with severe under-funding, have led to levels of education no longer being comparable to the rest of the world.

The result of this system has meant outdated teaching materials which can never keep up with translations into the national language and thus, skeletal knowledge being taught in an easily digestible form.

Graduates of this system have had to upgrade their skills and knowledge at their own expense by enrolling in

private tuition courses. These offer training in subjects of a practical and vocational nature, such as accountancy, electrical engineering, mechanical training, computer skills, television repair and maintenance and English language, to name a few. For this reason, the paper qualifications or degree of a prospective employee may show a B.A. in Geography, for instance, but his real skills may lie elsewhere. He may not even have a certificate to prove these skills and the only way to find out about them would be to offer probation periods for such employees.

Young people are especially eager to learn new things, make a reasonable living and succeed. They are also very flexible. Because of this it may be worthwhile employing young people even if they only have basic communication skills and educational qualifications.

In the past, employees in state organisations could not be fired once they were in but the fact that this is not the practice in private enterprise is well recognised. Young people are perhaps more likely to learn to understand these values than the older generation and, with this new ethic in mind, efficiency and productivity can be achieved.

Many young Myanmar abroad find it hard to get a job on the basis of their degrees because the universities in Yangon are no longer recognised as the reputable institutions that they once used to be. It is frustrating when students have to study for diplomas abroad, even when they hold a bachelor's degree in the same subject from Myanmar. For many, the very exposure to the English medium is worth the effort. And to receive a diploma that has international standing is a great achievement.

Blue-Collar Workers

A lot of things which need accuracy may be done inaccurately simply because the people concerned are inclined to easygoing and non-specific habits. For example, in the villages, if you ask for directions you may get answers like, "As far as a stone's throw away," which could be anything from a few metres to several hundred metres.

You will need to set the work ethic down since most labourers, if they come from agricultural backgrounds, are more used to working and living in tune with nature and the seasons. They will like to take a nap when they are tired or sit around and talk, basically because agricultural life does not generally call for urgency.

Businesses in Yangon are said to be impeded by workers indulging in lotteries the first few days of every month; a two-digit lottery (*hna-lone-hti*) is especially addictive—betting is on the last two digits of the winning number of the official lottery run by the Finance Ministry.

However, most Myanmar are eager to learn and can do so very quickly, provided instructions and reasons for doing things in a certain way are clearly understood.

Accidents

In Myanmar, mortality rates are very high and life expectancy is quite low due to poor medical facilities and a generally poor quality of life. Consequently, death is perceived as a common part of life that is unavoidable. It's a case of 'when your number's up'. Therefore, no great effort is made to champion the workers' safety rights and claims for compensation are seldom followed up. Similarly, doctors are not sued for mistakes that cause death, as the philosophy is that suing will not bring the dead person back.

Protection Against Work Hazards

Many workers are oblivious to danger and hazards in the work place. The dangers of using and working around machinery need to be adequately impressed upon them, otherwise they will surely fail to protect themselves in any way.

Language and Communication

Language barriers could be a problem but may be solved by local managerial and supervisory staff acting as intermediaries. However, you would have to train them to your standards first.

Frankness, openness and direct admissions are rare. Mistakes may be covered up when those concerned try to make amends in a panic. You may also find that your apparently clear instructions have not been carried out at all. Confusion over instructions may lead to work just being shelved because Myanmar workers do not like to lose face and come and ask you what you meant.

Although English can be understood, proficiency may not be very high so that it is best to use simple English and not idiomatic speech. As in other Asian countries, Caucasian investors may find it more expedient either to start a business with a local partner or obtain local managerial staff of required educational standards and let them take care of lower level management.

Asian-Asian relationships are not expected to cause as much difficulty as Western-Asian relationships. As Myanmar has been a colony for a long time, there is still some lingering resistance to the West and Caucasians. This does not apply so much to young people as they may perceive all things Western as superior, having grown up in an entirely closed country.

Working Relationships

In all relationships, no matter how you may try to divide them into social and professional groups, you will find social considerations always have weight. As a superior, you will be looked upon as a father and a teacher if your subordinates really like you.

You may be asked for loans in crises, as well as for shelter or food and advice. You may well have to disappoint them in these requests but try to offer positive alternatives. This will help you prevent loss of face and, consequently, respect.

When making criticisms of work errors, it is a good idea not to do it in front of other staff. Take your subordinate aside and do the scolding quietly in your own office. Avoid shouting and make sure your reasons for the correction are clearly understood so that your employee knows you are criticising work procedures and not him personally. If necessary, formal training should be given in order

to orient employees to the company's philosophy and work ethic.

Maintain Good Relationships

The staff at all levels of government organisations are important when you are worried about the progress of your projects and plans put up for approval. Any little aspect of your project which is unclear to those processing it may result in a total halt because of uncertainty on the part of a junior as to how to proceed. He will not dare (or even know) whom to consult. Thus, one has to keep tabs on the progress of projects through every stage and for this you need to be on a certain footing with the people concerned, from the lowliest clerks to the highest officials. Ask any successful businessman and he will tell you how important these relationships are.

NEW ENTREPRENEURS

Since the government announced that the economy was finally open to private investment, nearly everyone is a potential entrepreneur. Everyone who is of working age is either about to go into business, has just done so or is about to leave his government job where the pay is so low that it is hardly enough to keep body and soul together. Many do not know how to go about it or where to start but still they take the plunge.

Those who have always had a family business and business connections have the advantage because they can expand and diversify. On the other hand, some of those who worked in government jobs are the ones who may not have connections or capital and they also lack exposure to business practices. They may also be very cautious and not keen to take risks.

Private limited companies and partnerships are being registered in quite large numbers. At the same time, newspapers carry announcements of dissolutions every day. Export-import businesses, in name only, seem to be particularly popular. This may be because passports may be issued to the manager or director of such companies,

who can then travel to places within the region to look for business of any kind.

Lack of exposure to the international business environment and business practices is perhaps the greatest drawback these new entrepreneurs face. During the years that Myanmar was closed, the business world has been totally transformed by high technology which most Myanmar people have no conception of.

Nevertheless, since there are now many young people studying business administration and computer science both within the country and overseas, there is hope for the future. In trying to understand this, one must remember that the Myanmar people never saw black and white TV but were first introduced to the medium in colour. They have to cope with the same situation in business.

After some teething troubles, a fledgling class of entrepreneurs and a large number of would-be businessmen and women should inevitably produce successful business people in the near future.

Business Language

Business is conducted in English. Every official is likely to speak English to a reasonable degree. Contracts will be signed in English. The Myanmar language is necessary only for social purposes, to be able to greet your counterparts. Fluency is not essential.

BUSINESS MEETINGS

Business in Myanmar is largely on a face-to-face basis so phone calls will be to no avail (if you can get your call through in the first place). Your counterpart has to see you before he will even think of doing business. After seeing you, he may still need to get to know you better.

The first meeting will probably be to literally look at you and find out more about you personally. Then your investment intentions and your expertise will be matched against what is required on the Myanmar side. Giving overall summaries rather than greatly detailed plans at first meetings is likely to get your plans understood better.

If you need to meet government officials (as is highly likely since large ventures will probably be government-linked), it is important to get titles of rank and names correct. Ministries are divided into corporations and directorates. Corporations deal in products and directorates in services. Managing Directors and Director Generals are the chief executive officers of corporations and directorates. General Managers, the next level, are the subordinates of Managing Directors. Ministers themselves may participate at meetings.

Women officials may not shake hands with you on being introduced. It is better to wait to see if ladies extend hands first, before making a mistake. Smiles and nods are otherwise sufficient.

Myanmar Standard Time

Myanmar Standard Time is 'rubber' time. The concept of time is not always related to the clock. Officials can keep you waiting for hours, but visitors should be punctual!

Slowness pervades nearly every process in Myanmar, especially if it is linked in any way to officialdom. You have to understand that slowness is caused by extreme caution, not wishing to make mistakes, language problems and trying to gauge trustworthiness, among other reasons. A lot of officials are entrenched in cautiousness from years of working in a system that never rewards initiative and quick action, but punishes every mistake, even when a 'mistake' was really the right thing to do.

Greasing palms has been rampant and in inverse proportion to the slowness!

DRESSING ETIQUETTE

Dress code for business meetings is at least a tie and shirt if not full suit. The Myanmar official will wear an overjacket, called *tike-pon*, to the office and to meetings. Women will wear a long-sleeved blouse to the office. Short sleeves or sleeveless blouses are for casual wear only. Women business visitors should wear skirt suits or trouser suits. Neatness and smartness are valued more than high fashion. Most offices are as yet not air-conditioned so light materials are more suitable than heavy ones.

ENTERTAINING AND GIFTS

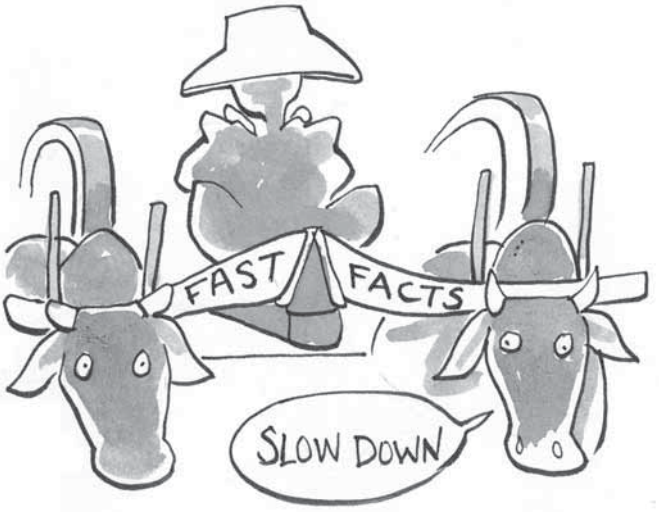
Entertaining business friends tends to take place in hotels and restaurants. Official dinners are also held in hotels.

Colleagues generally expect gifts only when they leave an organisation, if they are getting married or having a baby. It is not usual to buy presents for celebrations such as New Year.

In addition to the gift suggestions made in Chapter Four, appropriate gifts for business colleagues are paperweights, diaries, pens and other kinds of stationery. For working women, handbags and purses are also appropriate.

FAST FACTS

CHAPTER 10



'[Teak trees make up] 10–12 percent of Myanmar's forests ... [They] can reach a height of up to 150 feet (46 m), with a maximum girth of 6–8 feet (1.8–2.4 m), and may take up 150 years to mature.'
— Pauline Khng, *Countries of the World: Myanmar*

Official Name
Union of Myanmar

Capital
Nay Pyi Daw (near Pyinmana)

Language
Myanmar

Flag
On a red background, a blue rectangle upper left hand corner; blue stands for peace and stability and red for courage and determination. On the blue rectangle are a rice plant and cogwheel representing agriculture and industry which are the pillars of the economy. Surrounding the rice plant and cogwheel are fourteen stars, one for each of the country's seven states and seven divisions.

Climate
Three seasons, hot (April to June), rainy (July to October), and cool (November to March). Average temperatures in Yangon, the largest city: in hot season about 32°C (90°F), rainy season about 26.6°C (80°F) and cool season about -5°C (23°F).

National Anthem
Kaba Ma Kyei (Till the End of the World)

Time Zone
Greenwich Mean Time plus 6 and a half hours (GMT + 0630)

Telephone Country Code
95

Land Area
677,000 sq km (261,391 sq miles)

Natural Resources
Petroleum, timber, tin, antimony, zinc, copper, tungsten, lead, coal, some marble, limestone, precious stones, natural gas and hydropower

Population
47,382,633 (July 2006 est.)

Ethnic Groups
Burman 68 per cent, Shan 9 per cent, Karen 7 per cent, Rakhine 4 per cent, Chinese 3 per cent, Indian 2 per cent, Mon 2 per cent and others 5 per cent

Religion
Buddhist 89 per cent, Christian 4 per cent (Baptist 3 per cent, Roman Catholic 1 per cent), Muslim 4 per cent, animist 1 per cent, other 2 per cent

Government
Military junta

Administrative Divisions
7 divisions (*taing-myar*, singular—*taing*) and 7 states (*pyi ne-myar*, singular—*pyi ne*). Divisions: Ayeyarwady, Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Yangon. States: Chin State, Kachin State, Kayah State, Kayin State, Mon State, Rakhine State and Shan State

Currency
Kyat (abbreviated as K) and pyas (100 pyas = K 1)

Gross Domestic Product (per capita)

US$ 1,800 (2006 est.)

Imports

Fabric, petroleum products, plastics, machinery, transport equipment, construction materials, crude oil; food products

Exports

Clothing, gas, wood products, pulses, beans, fish, rice

Weather

Depends on the geographical zone but usually sunny and warm in most parts especially Yangon and Mandalay

FAMOUS PEOPLE

U Thant (1909–1974)

U Thant served for ten years as Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1961 after the sudden death of Dag Hammerskjold in a plane crash, until 1971. U Thant died of cancer in 1974 at age 65, in New York. He was born in Pantanaw, a town in the Ayeyarwady delta region of Myanmar and was a school teacher, later head master and a close friend of U Nu, the first Prime Minister of the Union of Burma after independence from the British. U Thant's body was brought back to Myanmar and student riots erupted over the choice of the burial place. He is buried near the entrance to the southern stairway of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, close to the tomb of Queen Supaya Lat, the last queen of Burma before the British conquered the country and that of Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, a famous politician, writer and intellectual.

General Aung San (1915–1947)

General Aung San is regarded by the Myanmar people as the father of the nation, helping the country to gain independence from the British, starting from his university student days as a student leader and then as leader of the Thakin Movement. He founded the Anti-Facist People's

Freedom League (AFPFL). During World War II, Aung San was the commander-in-chief of the Burma Independence Army which had received Japanese training and was to drive out the British but the BIA later aligned itself with the British to drive out the Japanese. Aung San was assassinated in 1947 just months before the nation's independence, together with six other members of the cabinet. He was only 32 years old.

U Nu (1907–1995)

U Nu was the first Prime Minister of the country when independence was gained from the British in 1948, due to the premature death of Aung San who had been designated to be prime minister upon the country's independence. He was born in 1907 and graduated from university with a BA degree. He was one of the active members of the Thakin Movement. After independence, he led the AFPFL to victory in the 1951, 1956 and 1960 elections. He was a devout Buddhist and tried to declare Buddhism a state religion, which only alienated the ethnic peoples. He convened the Sixth Buddhist Synod attended by 2500 monks in 1954 and built the World Buddhist University and the Ka-ba Aye Pagoda. He was arrested after the coup d'etat in 1962 and carried on a resistance movement from Thailand after being released in 1966, later returning to Myanmar under an amnesty. He died in 1995 at the age of 88.

General Ne Win (1911–2002)

General Ne Win was born in 1911. He worked as a postal clerk before joining the army, not having completed his university education. He was one of the Thirty Comrades who fought the British and later drove out the Japanese. In 1958, he was Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces and was asked by U Nu the Prime Minister to head a Caretaker Government known as the Revolutionary Council and after general elections were held, the country was again under civilian rule. In 1962, he came to power after a coup d'etat and ruled the country under various guises for almost 26 years and he was famous as a strongman or dictator. His

regime founded the Burma Socialist Programme Party. The Party was dissolved in 1988 and the country was ruled by the State Law and Order Council (later State Peace and Development Council) but it was widely believed that the General ruled from behind the scenes. In early 2002 one of his sons-in-law and three of his grandsons were accused of treason and were arrested and sentenced to prison terms. He died in 2002, aged 91, and he was not accorded a state funeral nor one with military honours.

Aung San Suu Kyi (1945–)

Born 19 June 1945, the only daughter of General Aung San and Daw Khin Kyi, she was educated in Myanmar, India and England. She married Dr Michael Aris, a Tibetan scholar from Oxford and has two sons. In the mid 1980s, she had come back to Myanmar from Oxford to look after her mother who was sick and dying. She set up the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 1989 and was later put under house arrest. In the elections of 1990, her party won by a landslide but power was not handed over to the party. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and has since won many other prizes. She was released in 1995 and rearrested in 2000; released in 2002 and then again put under house arrest in May 2003 while on an upcountry tour and has not been released as at March 2007, despite many appeals for her release by well known international figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former Czech president Vaclav Havel. (Dr Aris died of cancer in 1999 after being denied a visa to enter Myanmar to see Aung San Suu Kyi one last time.)

ICONS

Shwe Dagon Pagoda

This is the largest of all the pagodas in the country and the holiest for the Buddhists of Myanmar; it is believed to contain the hair of Gotama Buddha and the relics of the past Buddhas of this world cycle. It is the essence of Myanmar and Buddhism for the Myanmar people. Pilgrims come from all over the country to worship here and those who have moved

overseas always seem to long for a glimpse of the great pagoda and never fail to visit when they return home.

Ayeyarwady River

The Ayeyarwady is the longest, at 2,170 km (1,348 miles), and widest river in the country. Along its banks or close by, the early kingdoms of Myanmar such as Bagan and Innwa were founded, as well as the last kingdom, Mandalay. The people think of the river as the lifeline of Myanmar. Its source lies in the Himalayas and its delta is the region that produces rice and other important crops as well as fish and shrimp products.

Mandalay

Made famous by Rudyard Kipling's *On the Road to Mandalay* (although there are no flying fishes to be found) Mandalay is the city where the last dynasty of Myanmar was founded before the country became a colony of the British empire. One finds here, the essence of Myanmar culture and the people of Mandalay pride themselves on being cultured, well spoken and polite, while the people of lower Myanmar appear rough and rude compared to them. Mandalay is also the centre of the country's religion, Buddhism, with many important monasteries located here. Also, more than half of the total number of monks in the country is concentrated in and around Mandalay.

CULTURE QUIZ

SITUATION 1

You want to invite a Myanmar friend over to an informal dinner at your house. You run into this friend but he is with two other friends whom you know only slightly. You:

Ⓐ Invite your friend only and ignore the other two.
Ⓑ Invite the whole group, telling your friend to bring his friends as well.
Ⓒ Change your mind and decide not to invite any of them.

Comments

The first solution is typical of Westerners who are not acquainted with local ways. By inviting only one person out of a group it shows that you do not value the friendship of the other two—an insult in their eyes. Moreover, it is worth remembering that Myanmar people like to have a companion when they go to dinners, not necessarily escorts, but simply a familiar Myanmar face. This applies especially when they are with foreigners.

The third solution is a possible one, as it is likely that your friend will be reluctant to come alone anyway.

Solution Ⓑ is the best in a Myanmar situation because it shows you understand the concept of face. It is likely that two or all three of the group will turn up.

SITUATION 2

The daughter of one of your business friends is getting married. The wedding card has arrived and it says in Myanmar at the bottom: "Kindly do not give wedding presents." Your secretary translates this for you, but offers no advice. What does it mean and how would you handle it?

Ⓐ Ignore the instruction and bring a present anyway.
Ⓑ Heed the instruction and go to the wedding without a gift.
Ⓒ Make an excuse not to attend as you feel it puts you under some kind of obligation.

Comments

The little line at the bottom of a wedding card is often seen, especially when couples feel that they do not want to impose on guests for wedding presents at a time when prices of many consumer goods are barely affordable for most.

As you are a friend and wish to maintain the social and business relationship, you should ignore this line and give a present anyway. It need not be terribly expensive or luxurious but something really useful like bed linen, towels of good quality or a small tea set—something that the bride, especially, will appreciate. Ⓑ would be seen as niggardly on your part if you are well off. Ⓒ is not a good option as not attending without good reason could be taken as an insult.

SITUATION 3

You are about to leave Myanmar after having stayed there some years. You have some things you would like to dispose of, such as good quality children's clothes, cosmetics, household linen, books and electrical appliances. Some Myanmar friends ask you whether you will be selling any of your things. You:

Ⓐ Tag everything with a price and will not entertain any bargaining.

Ⓑ Price the electrical appliances, but decide to give away some things with each appliance sold.

Ⓒ Decide to give the clothes and books to Myanmar friends who have quite large families, bringing the gifts over to their home yourself.

Comments

Ⓑ is a good solution because it allows you to earn something without appearing stingy. No one expects you to give away everything. What is more important, you save face for your friends who would not want to receive too much for free. To price everything (Ⓐ) is possible, but you will appear to be miserly and too eager to earn money from used articles!

The third solution is a reasonable option but before you act on it, you should inquire whether your friends would be interested in the goods. If you are thinking of a group of friends, it is a good idea to lump all the things together for them to divide as they wish. They will then be able to choose what they need.

SITUATION 4

You are going to your country for a home visit. A friend of yours has a son studying abroad. He requests you to take some things which turn out to be quite heavy. You:

Ⓐ Decide to ring up your friend later and tell him you are unable to carry them with you.
Ⓑ Decide to take them with your unaccompanied baggage.
Ⓒ Decide to tell him to take away half of the things and agree to carry the rest.

Comments

Ⓐ and Ⓒ are solutions that make you appear difficult and ungracious. They also involve a loss of face for you since you have to refuse your friend.

The second solution is a good compromise, as you are not imposed on to the extent of having to carry heavy things yourself. Provided the parcel is not urgently needed, your friend would be happy with this arrangement.

SITUATION 5

You have been travelling around the country with Myanmar friends and visit a monastery to take some photographs. The abbot is very kind and shows you old carvings, teak pillars, old statues, etc. What should you do when you leave?

Ⓐ As your Myanmar friends pay their respects in the traditional way, you walk out the door.
Ⓑ You ask your friends if a small donation would be acceptable.
Ⓒ You shake the monk's hand and thank him.

Comments

The best solution is Ⓑ. It is appropriate for donations to be made after visiting a monastery, whether the abbot has been obliging or not.

As for Ⓒ, you cannot shake hands with a monk if you are a woman: touching the opposite sex is forbidden in their rules. If you choose Ⓐ, it shows you lack refinement. The

abbot has been kind and it is appropriate to show gratitude and respect in some way. It is very rude to go without saying a word, even if you feel confused about how to behave.

DO'S AND DON'TS

DO'S

- Do use *U* or *Daw* when addressing adults.
- Do smile when greeting your Myanmar friends.
- Do wear clothes that are conservative rather than ultra modern.
- Do take off your shoes when entering Myanmar homes unless everyone inside still have their shoes on. (At temples and monasteries however it is a must to remove shoes and socks.)
- Do be polite to those who are older or have a higher position than oneself.
- Do put your donation to a monk in an envelope and place it near him or give it to his attendant.
- Do ask questions about the food your host has laid out for you or about the ceremony taking place.
- Do give gifts at weddings and at the birth of a child.
- Do bring useful and consumerable gifts when visiting a Myanmar home.

DON'TS

- Don't pat your Myanmar friends on the head or touch their hair.
- Don't point with your foot at objects, or put your feet up on your desk (except in your private office).
- Don't wear shorts, miniskirts or go bra-less to temples and monasteries.
- Don't embrace or kiss your female colleagues or friends in a greeting if you are male—there is a general taboo about touching between the sexes.
- Don't touch a monk's robes or his person, if you are a woman.
- Don't talk politics or religion in public.
- Don't scold your Myanmar staff in front of others as it causes him/her to lose face.
- Don't shout especially at the elderly staff.
- Don't pass objects over the heads of monks or elders.

GLOSSARY

Burmese	Meaning
akutho	Opposite of merit, loosely translated as "sin". See *kutho*.
ah-nar-hmu	Feeling of not wanting to cause loss of face, pain, not wanting to impose on others.
Abhidhamma	The Third Basket of the *Tripitaka* (Basket of Ultimate Things), a subtle analysis of Mind, Psychic Factors, Matter and Nirvana. See *Tripitaka*.
aingyi	Blouse or shirt.
ba wa	Existence.
bhavana	Insight or wisdom (*Pali*).
dana	Charity (*Pali*).
Daw	Prefix for adult women.
kadawt	Gesture of obeisance made by sitting in a kneeling position on the floor and bowing, with hands held palms together. The *kadawt* is a gesture made to parents and teachers.
Ko	Prefix for young adult male.
ko chinn sar-nar-hmu	A feeling of consideration.
kutho	Merit or merits. See *akutho*.
kyat	Local currency. See *pya*.
longyi	Sarong for men and women. (Sarong for women also called *hta-mein*.)
Ma	Prefix for young girl.
Maung	Prefix for young male.
pya	Local coins. See kyat.
Saya	Prefix for teacher, boss, superior (male).

Burmese	Meaning
Sayama	Prefix for teacher, superior (female).
sila	Morality (*Pali*).
soon-kyway	Feast for monks.
Than-tha-yar	Cycles of existence (commonly known as samsara).
Tike-pon	Jacket for men.
Tripitaka	Buddhist canon (Three Baskets). See *Abhidhamma*.
Triple Gems	Buddha, the Dhamma (teachings of Buddha) and the Sangha (order of monks).
U	Prefix for adult male.

FAMILY TERMS

Burmese	Meaning
pe pe (pay pay)	father
may may	mother
daw daw	aunt
daw lay	younger aunt
u u (oo oo)	uncle
ba ba	uncle (elder brother of father)
ako, ako gyi	elder brother
nyi, nyi lay	younger brother
ahma gyi	elder sister
nyi ma lay	younger sister
po po	grandfather
pwa pwa	grandmother

MYANSPEAK

The following is a compilation of some commonly used slang consisting of Myanmar words and also English words used in Myanmar context.

Burmese	Literal Meaning	Meaning
ah kaung	beast, monster	person with power, clout
ar loo myar	full of potatoes (from Indian word)	to be full of air, wind, thus just talk
flat *pya*	flat showing	to be flat on one's back, dead tired
free *yike*	to wander about freely, aimlessly	to be absent without leave
htaw		to get rich quick
hlee (or) *pah pah hlee*	slice (or) slice thinly	to get disproportionate profit out of trade deal, a rip off
im/in	(from) imitation	imitation, fake
in tin tin		coy, hesitant, reluctant
kah lah	colour	political affiliation (e.g. no kahlah: having no affiliation)
kay khoke	chop tresses	to get a hair cut
khauk htar	keep folded, shelved	don't pay attention to, give no importance to
mike tei	naughty	smart, sharp looking, sophisticated, clever (about behaviour or clothes)
MC		medical leave certificate, also Master of Ceremonies
Model out		out of date model (used for clothes, cars, shoes)
Maw sa ko	Moscow	prison, jail, concentration camp

Burmese	Literal Meaning	Meaning
out nay dei		out of things, out of sync or rhythm, out of line
Tea *lah, kaw lah*		tea or coffee?
No two		without equal, the very limit (derogatory sense), absolutely awful
No is		don't have (it), (it's) not here
pei myar dei	full of beans/dhal	show off too much
stay *ya dei*	got stay	to get a visa to stay in a foreign country
stay *shaung de*	avoid stay	to go to another country on expiry of visa so as to extend or renew the visa by re-entering
toh htar	shorten	to keep for oneself, to steal
view		interview for a job
WC	water closet (archaic)	toilet
yaw gar	disease	to have an obsession, fixation, weird, odd
yeik	harvest or reap	to skim off for personal gain from somewhere

SLANG FOR DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES

The following are letters of Myanmar alphabet used to denote different nationalities:

Burmese	Literal Meaning	Meaning
Ga ngei, ja or gya	first letter of the word Ja-pun	Japanese
Ya p'let	first letter of the word Yo-da-ya	Thai
Ma	first letter of Malayshah	Malaysian
In	first letter of Indoneesha	Indonesian
Sa'lone	first letter of Singapu	Singaporean
Shwe or shway	gold	Myanmar citizens (of the Golden Land)
Hpa-oh-htoke	equivalent letter for F sound, first letter for spelling Filipino in the Myanmar language	Filipino

SOME MEDICAL TERMS

Burmese	Literal Meaning	Meaning
heart *shi de*	to have heart	to have heart disease
gastric *shi de*	to have gastric	to have a gastric ulcer
CA *shi de*	to have CA	to have cancer
CS *loke te*	to have a CS	to have a caesarian section, operation

SEXUAL TERMS

Burmese	Meaning
ah chauk	homosexual, gay
ACT	initials for spelling *ah-chit-taw*, meaning lesbian partner or friend

RESOURCE GUIDE

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- **Ambulance** 295 133
- **Police** 199
- **Fire** 191

EMBASSIES

- **Australia**; 88 Strand Road;
  tel: (1) 251 809–10, fax: (1) 246 159

- **Cambodia**; 25, 3B/4B New University Avenue Road;
  tel: (1) 549 609

- **China**; 1 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Road;
  tel: (1) 222 803./ 221 281, fax: (1) 227 019

- **Egypt**; 81 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Road;
  tel: (1) 222 886–7, fax: (1) 222 865

- **France**; 102 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Road;
  tel: (1) 212 523, 212 532, fax: (1) 212 527

- **Germany**; 9 Bogyoke Aung San Museum Road;
  tel: (1) 548 951–3, fax: (1) 548 899

- **India**; 545–547 Merchant Road; tel: (1) 282 933, 240 633,
  fax: (1) 254 086

- **Israel**; 15 Khabaung Road, 6 1/2 Mile, Hlaing;
  tel: (1) 515 115, fax: (1) 515 116

- **Italy**; 3 Inyamyaing Road; tel: (1) 527 100–1,
  fax: (1) 514 565

- **Korea (Republic of)**; 97 University Avenue;
  tel: (1) 527 142–4, fax: (1) 513 286

- **Laos**; A/1 Tawwin Road; tel: (1) 222 482, fax: (1) 227 446
- **Malaysia**; 82 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Road; tel: (1) 220 248–49/51, 220 230, fax: (1) 221 840
- **Nepal**; 16 Natmauk Yeiktha Road; tel: (1) 545 880, fax: (1) 549 803
- **Pakistan**; 4A Pyay Road; tel: (1) 221 866, 222 881–2, fax: (1) 221 147
- **Philippines**; 50 Saya San Road; tel: (1) 558 149–51, fax: (1) 558 154
- **Russia**; 38 Sagawa Road; tel: (1) 241 955, fax: (1) 241 953
- **Singapore**; 238 Damazedi Road; tel: (1) 559 001, fax: (1) 559 002
- **Sri Lanka**; 34 Tawwin Road; tel: (1) 222 812, fax: 221 509
- **Thailand;** 73 Manawhari Road; tel: (1) 224 550 / 224 647 / 224 507, fax: (1) 225 929
- **United Kingdom**; 80 Strand Road; tel: (1) 256 438 / 370 863 / 380 322, fax: (1) 380 321
- **United States**; 581 Merchant Street; tel: (1) 256 019–20, fax: (1) 280 409
- **Vietnam**; 39 Wingaba Road; tel: (1) 548 905, fax: (1) 549 302

GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

- **Immigration** 286 434
- **Ministry of Communications** 292 955

- **Ministry of Culture** 543 233
- **Ministry of Education** 285 588
- **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** 222 844
- **Ministry of Hotels and Tourism** 254 098
- **Ministry of Information** 294 827
- **Yangon City Development Committee** 282 954

HEALTH SERVICES

- **Asia Royal Cardiac and Medical Care**; 14 Baho Road, Sanchaung; tel: (1) 510 158 / 511 962 / 532 802

- **Central Women's Hospital**; Baho Road; tel: 222 811 / 222 804–806

- **Thukha Gaba Cardiovascular and Diagnostic Centre**; 615 (G) Pyay Road, Kamayut; tel: 247 592–3

- **Yangon Children's Hospital**; 2 Pyidaungsu Yeiktha Road; tel: (1) 222 807–10 / 221 421

- **Yangon International Clinic**; Summit Parkview Hotel, 350 Ahlone Road; tel: (1) 211 888; ext: 180

- **Yangon General Hospital**; Bogyoke Aung San Street; tel: (1) 256 112 / 256 131

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

- **United Nations Development Program**; 6 Natmauk Road; tel: (1) 542 910–19, fax: (1) 292 739

- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**; 287 Pyay Road; tel: (1) 524 022, 524 024, fax: (1) 524 031

- **United Nations Children's Fund**; Yangon International Hotel, Ahlone Road; tel: (1) 212 086–7, fax: (1) 212 063

- **World Health Organization**; Yangon International Hotel, Ahlone Road; tel: (1) 212 606–9, fax: (1) 212 605

FURTHER READING

Abbott, Gerry, *Back to Mandalay*. Travellers Tales Series, Impact Books, Bromley, Kent, 1990.

- A delightful account of the author's stay in Mandalay as an English lecturer, ending with the demonstrations of 1988.

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Aung Aung Taik, *Visions of Shwedagon*. White Lotus Co. Ltd., Bangkok, 1989.

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- A collection of lucid essays and research papers.

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- A compilation of contributions from 20 autobiographies of members of the Society covering the period 1910s to 1980s.

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Elliot, Patricia, *The White Umbrella*. Post Publishing Company, Bangkok, 1999; Weatherhill, Connecticut, 2002.

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- Lectures, talks and papers given or written as Professor of Burmese at SOAS, University of London. Many aspects of Myanmar life are covered, including language, literature, family and Buddhism.

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- The author retraces the steps of Victorian Sir James George Scott to find a lake in the remote wild Wa land of headhunters in northeast Myanmar.

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- The author traces her ancestors based on the diaries of her father and provides a rare and very interesting account of the life and times of her illustrious forefathers in Burma under the British up to independence.

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- A National Geographic video on the Ayeyarwady River.

Websites

http://www.myanmar.com

- Provides government-related information.

http://www.irrawaddy.org

- *Irrawaddy* is an independent magazine covering Myanmar and Southeast Asia, and its website offers current news reports.

http://www.geocities.com/thetropics/Cabana/7789/burmanf.htm

- A foreigner's descriptions of his experience in Myanmar. It also offers descriptions and photos of many well-known sights in the country.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saw Myat Yin was born in Yangon (Rangoon) in the post-war period. She was educated at the Methodist English High School and later at the University of Rangoon (now Yangon University). She is married and has two children. Saw Myat Yin is also the author of *Cultures of the World: Myanmar*, published by Marshall Cavendish Editions.

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